

THE EMPTY HOUSE
by Algernon Blackwood

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HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

October, 1983

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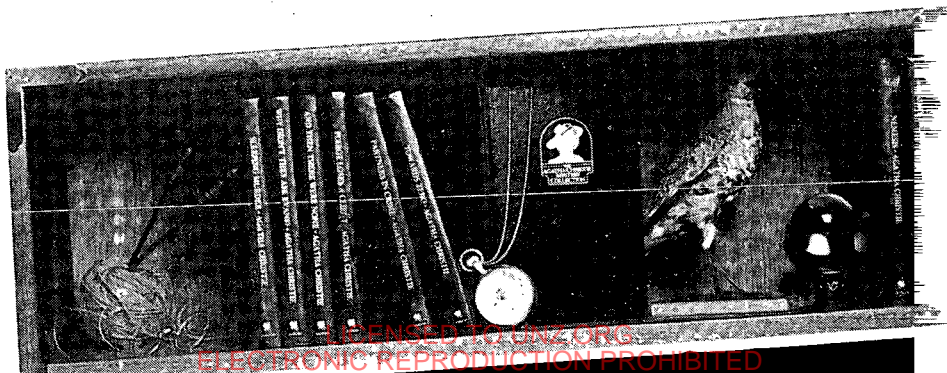


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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

October—or at least the October issue—being upon us, one begins to think of Halloween, and with that in mind, we thought it appropriate to include some stories in the pages that follow to help along the spirit(s) of the season. We won't tell you just where the ghosts are lurking, or what they're up to, or even if they're real, but you'll find that (here and there) the criminals and the cops have some shadowy companions.

There's a ghostly tree as well, in the Mysterious Photograph, and the Mystery Classic ("The Empty House" by Algernon Blackwood) takes place in a haunted house.

Finally, for further discussions of haunted houses and the like in mystery fiction and films, see *Off the Record and Frames of Reference*.

Before Halloween actually

does descend on us, however, a big event in the mystery world will be taking place in the same month: Bouchercon XIV. That annual convention of mystery writers and mystery readers alike will last from October 21st through the 23rd in New York, at the Barbizon-Plaza Hotel. John D. MacDonald will be the guest of honor, and the three-day event will be packed with talks, panel discussions, the showing of classic mystery movies, and the chance to browse through tables of used and sometimes rare copies of mystery fiction and nonfiction, in the dealers' room.

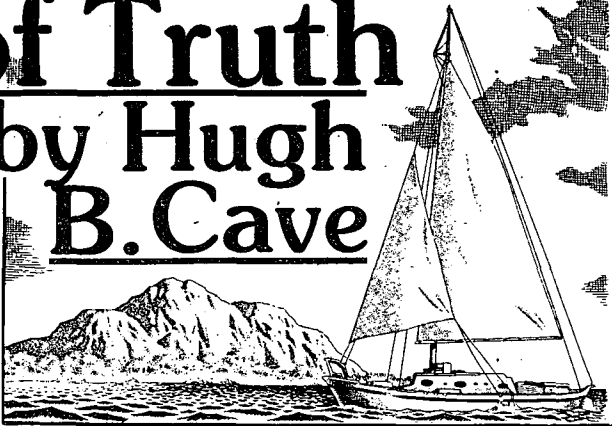
The admission charge for the convention is \$30. Those of you who are interested in attending it should write to Bouchercon XIV, % Otto Penzler, 129 West 56th Street, New York, New York 10019, for further information and a registration form.

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The Isle of Truth by Hugh B. Cave



It was the talk of the village. Young people shook their heads in solemn disapproval. Their elders muttered about offending the old gods.

Only two months ago the girl, Tiona, had happily planned to go to the Isle of Truth with her young lover for the marriage testing. Now she was to go there with a man twenty years older, and not even of the islands. Just because he could buy for her all the pretty things a girl might crave.

For shame!

Young men and young women of this South Pacific archipelago always spent a night together at the Isle of Truth before taking the vow to love and cherish each other for the rest of their lives. It was the custom. It had always been the custom. On the Isle of Truth, with its cliffs and grottoes, the ancestral spirits would assist in the decision making. No one but the spirits lived there.

Tiona had proudly planned to go there with Walui, who was her own age and handsome and earned a good living diving for Mr. Yee. But he had drowned before they could make the pilgrimage, and now she was going there with Mr. Yee himself.

He, of course, was wealthy. In his two years as a pearler in the archipelago he had become very wealthy indeed, hiring younger men to dive for him.

Tiona and Mr. Yee left for the isle while the sun was still above the western horizon, and the villagers stood on the beach in silence, watching them go. As their canoe sped from shore, with Mr. Yee hunched like a toad over its outboard motor, no one waved or called out after it.

Only one person, in fact, even moved. Lepa, the brother of the boy who would have become Tiona's husband but for the accident, walked slowly down to the water's edge and stood there like a bronze statue, fiercely scowling, with his muscled arms folded on his chest.

The girl in the canoe, looking back, saw him standing there, but gave no sign. Mr. Yee, having adjusted the motor, also looked back at the beach. "Why is that one watching us?" he demanded.

"I don't know."

With a shrug, Mr. Yee turned his gaze on the distant speck of land for which they were bound. Let the boy watch. Let them all watch. He, Vincent Yee, was going to the Isle of Truth and would find there what he hungered for.

As the canoe glided swiftly onward over a green, calm sea, Mr. Yee gazed at his companion and struggled to curb his impatience. Without question she possessed the loveliest face and figure and the most deliciously golden skin of any young woman he had seen in the islands—and he had looked with appraising eyes at many of them, indeed. At the thought of spending the night alone with her, he felt a burning in his loins. And later, when he took her to wife, all his nights would be full of pleasures.

He would have no trouble wedding her, of course. When two people went to the Isle of Truth, they always did marry afterward. The night on the island was merely a formality. Besides, to be

practical about it, what other man in the archipelago could offer her a fine house, expensive clothes, and baubles that would make her the envy of her contemporaries? Even in bed, with his knowledge of women and their wants, he would in the end be better for her than any younger man she might have turned to.

"Are you excited, my pretty?" He tried to keep his thoughts out of his smile, lest she be alarmed.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Yee."

"Don't you think you might call me something less formal now? I do have a first name, you know."

"Vincent?"

"That's really much better. You'll become used to it." And to me, he silently added. Even if I'm not as young and handsome as the youth whose place I am taking.

As they approached their destination, with its brief strip of sand on which they would land, Mr. Yee found himself thinking of the "accident." He did not want to think about it, of course. Now that the deed was done, he would rather it stayed out of his mind forever. But it had happened off an islet much like this one and suddenly it was back in his thoughts.

He had been using three divers that day. Keeping young Walui with him on the schooner, he had sent the other two in the dingy to explore the back side of the island. Everything had been planned down to the smallest detail: the liquor expertly poisoned, the site especially selected because the treacherous currents there along the reef had trapped and nearly drowned a diver once before.

Not that he expected the reef to trap Walui. The poison would cause the death, and when the others found him they would suppose he had made one of the many fatal blunders a diver had to beware of. But a wise man played every possible angle, no? If the currents and the reef chose to cooperate, so much the better.

As a diver of some experience Walui should not have accepted a drink of liquor before going down, of course. But he was a polite young man, and in these islands a gift of any sort, offered by a man of Mr. Yee's standing, could not lightly be refused.

The others, on their return, had been forced to dive for the body because it had not come to the surface. Locating it in a particularly rough pocket of the reef, they seemed to be of the opinion that Walui had fallen prey to those unpredictable currents and become trapped.

A simple, though tragic, accident. Diving, after all, was a dangerous occupation.

And there had been no autopsy. In these islands there was not even a word for such a thing.

"We are here, Vincent," the girl said, smiling at him.

He ran the canoe gently up on the beach, and together they drew it to a place of safety under an overhang of vine-draped trees. Not that anything human was likely to trouble it. By custom, no one would come here tonight to disturb them. But the weather might change and the sea become hungry. One never knew.

The craft attended to, Mr. Yee turned to his betrothed and held out his hands. Not being as tall as she, he had to lift them to meet hers. "Now what do we do, my pretty?" As an outsider he could not be expected to know every detail of her native superstitions.

"Come."

"Come where?"

"There is a place to wait."

From the beach a footpath—obviously not often used, but a path nonetheless—led them into the jungle, where tree roots and hanging lianas gave Mr. Yee much trouble, and he envied the girl her ability to glide along without effort. Just as he was becoming more accustomed to the gloom and the obstacles, the path began to climb. Presently he realized that the island, despite its smallness, was decidedly more rugged than those of the archipelago that were inhabited.

Then suddenly he found himself in a small natural clearing, and saw before him what appeared to be a jumble of large stone blocks. Tiona sank onto one and, again smiling, motioned him toward another. Out of breath, his chest heaving, he stared around him, then at her. "What is this place?"

"There was a temple here once, people say. No one knows what kind, or who built it."

"What destroyed it?"

"Who knows?" She shrugged. "Storms, perhaps. Or simply time."

"What are *we* supposed to do here?"

"Wait," she said. "Ask the spirits for guidance."

"All night?"

"Until daybreak. Then we make the walk."

The walk—ah, yes. He knew about that part of the ritual. He would walk one way around the island, the girl the other. If the spirits of the ancestors did not interfere—if the man and woman were allowed to complete the circuit and come face to face again—the marriage could take place. If not, they must go their separate ways.

Of course, he had no intention of sitting here on a block of stone from now until daylight.

He let half an hour pass while recovering from the effects of climbing from the beach. Then, going to where she sat, he placed his hands on her shoulders.

Tiona looked up at him, questioning with her eyes.

"At last we are alone together, my pretty," Mr. Yee murmured. Never before had that been possible. She had been Walui's girl, and Walui would have challenged him.

"Yes, we are alone." She nodded. "But not really."

He was startled into looking around. Then he was annoyed. "You told me—"

"They are here, Vincent. This is their island."

"Oh. Of course." Now he was not annoyed, but amused, and pretended to peer into the surrounding jungle in search of "them." It was dark now. He thought he heard a breeze stirring in the trees, but of course it was only his imagination. Had there been that much breeze, the sea would be making a noise at the base of the island's cliffs. "Well," he said lightly, reaching for her again, "I don't suppose they will mind if we amuse ourselves while waiting to make the walk. Do you?"

"They would mind, yes, Vincent."

"Oh, come on now. It's all right to believe in these old wives' tales, but if you're going to become the wife of a man like me—"

"No, Vincent!" She caught his wrists and pulled his hands away from her breasts. "We must not! The ancestral spirits would punish us!"

He fumbled for her again, but again she caught his wrists and denied him. She was stronger than he. He had watched her swim and run, and paddle a canoe, and knew he could never take her against her will. With his hands now on his hips, he stepped back and petulantly scowled at her.

"These ancestors of yours—why should it matter to them what we do while we wait?"

"They have not given their approval yet."

"For what? I'm not asking you to marry me this minute!"

"For what you want to do," she said. "Don't you understand? That is why we are here, Vincent—so they can look into our minds and decide about us. Please." She shook her head at him. "Go back and sit down. Be patient."

He returned to his stone and sat, but not to be patient, only to be angry with himself for having come here. He had not planned

on being made a fool of by a stupid native superstition. And yet, as time passed and the darkness deepened, he became resigned to the waiting. He would have her in the end, when they married. This is the price you must pay, he told himself with a mental shrug. Not such a high price, after all. Relax. Sleep.

When he looked toward the girl again, he could not see her in the darkness. "Tiona?"

"Yes, Vincent?"

"Goodnight, my pretty."

"Goodnight, Vincent."

"Sweet dreams."

"Yes, Vincent—sweet dreams."

Making himself as comfortable on the stone as one could on such a hard surface, Mr. Yee turned his face to the stars, closed his eyes, and slept. Strangely, his last thought before he fell asleep was not of the girl he had committed murder for, but of the stone on which he lay.

In the forgotten past a temple had stood here? What kind of temple? Perhaps the headman of the village, who was also the village magician, would know.

He awoke to find Tiona bending over him, and it was daybreak.

"It is time for the walk, Vincent."

As he slid from the stone and stretched the stiffness from his body, he had to smile. The night was over; not such an ordeal after all, though certainly not productive in the way he had hoped. Now the walk, the return to the village, and the preparations for the wedding. He could endure the walk as he had endured the night. The distance around the island could not be more than three quarters of a mile, and only a small part of it would be rough going.

"Which way am I to go, my pretty?"

"That way." She pointed toward where the sun would rise. "And I will go this way."

"And when we meet, it is a sign that the ancestors approve, eh?" What childishness! But then, they *were* children, these people. Just innocents.

"Yes, Vincent. And be careful. Stay on the path."

The path, he discovered, was like the one they had climbed from the beach: more like a wild-pig run than a track meant for people. For a time it followed a forested coral ridge that threatened to cut through the thin soles of his sneakers, and he walked slowly. Then it descended to a sea-level jungle floored with dark, moist earth.

And then it climbed to a second ridge that closely hugged the uneven contour of the island's shore.

The sun rose, but the forest kept its rays from helping him much, or even warming him. He could only grope along slowly, watching out for obstacles and reminding himself, as he tired, that he had to complete this foolish task if he wished to possess Tiona. "Everything has its price," he muttered.

It was a longer journey than he had anticipated. Twice he stopped to rest, telling himself he would be stupid to hurry when all that was required was for the two of them to meet. Let her do most of the walking. She was younger. She was stronger and more supple. He would need his energy later when he triumphed.

Then he came to the cliff.

The sun shone here without hindrance, bathing the face of the escarpment in golden light. It revealed two dark openings that were surely the mouths of caves, high above the shimmering green sea at the cliff's base. The path was a ledge no more than two feet wide, twisting past the cave mouths. More than likely the openings were rookeries for certain seabirds, and on a less sacred island the path here would have been used by natives searching for eggs.

He studied the ledge with care before venturing out on it. There were no dangers that he could discern, other than, of course, the drop into the sea should he suffer from vertigo and stumble. He was not afraid of that. Height had never troubled him. Nevertheless, he moved his feet warily, with his body in a crouch and one hand sliding along the cliff wall to steady himself. And on reaching the first cave he saw that it was, indeed, a haunt of birds. At least, it was floored with droppings, though empty at the moment.

On he went, more confident now that he did not have to fear being startled by a sudden exodus of frightened winged things. Approaching the second hole in the cliff, he was not even apprehensive.

But out of this second black fissure suddenly stepped a silent apparition that blocked his way. And he was looking, he knew, at the dead come to life.

In the archipelago, the dead were not merely placed in the earth and covered over. First they were rubbed with oil and smeared from head to foot with ashes. The creature standing before Mr. Yee had been embalmed that way. Its eyes glittered in an ashen face. Its reaching hands were ashen claws. Its whole naked body was ghastly gray.

But despite the ashes, the face was recognizable. Mr. Yee looked

at it in horror and, with a shriek, tried to turn and run for his life. On that narrow ledge, to turn so quickly was a mistake. He lost his balance and went hurtling into space. His screams followed him down until the sea changed them to a gurgle and silenced them.

The figure from the cave crouched on the path then and looked down—eighty-odd feet down to where the green water swelled against the base of the cliff. For all of five minutes it peered down without moving. Only then, when it could be sure Mr. Yee would not by some miracle reappear, did it straighten up.

As it did so, Tiona finished her part of the walk around the isle and appeared at the other end of the cliff path, and called it by name. And the gray figure strode to her along the ledge and took her hands.

"Is it done, Lepa?"

The brother of her dead Walui nodded. "It happened as the headman said it would. I did not even have to touch him. Murderers are not brave."

Stepping close, she put her face against his for a moment.

"And did he touch *you* last night?" Lepa asked with a scowl.

She shook her head. "As you say, murderers are not brave."

"We are avenged, then," he said, thinking again of how, on the day of his brother's death, he had swum down to bring up the body.

On the bottom under Mr. Yee's schooner he had found a message. The sea floor there was of hard, hard sand, nearly clay, and at first he had thought the writing just a squiggle left by a sea worm: a thing to be expected in such a place. But it had been scratched on the sea floor with a broken cowrie shell—the shell was there as proof—and, though brief and unfinished, it contained two words that told all he needed to know. The name *Yee*, and the word *poison*.

And he thought of how, without mentioning the message to Mr. Yee, he had gone to Tiona and told her. And then to the village headman, who was also the village sorcerer. And how the headman, whose duties included preparing the dead for burial, had planned what was to happen here this morning on the Isle of Truth.

"Come," he said, gently touching Tiona's face with his fingertips. "Let's go home. And when next you come here I hope you will come with me, for I love you as much as my brother did, and always have. And I look enough like him to be his twin, as even Mr. Yee would tell you if he could."

Crime and the Cloister

by Janet
O'Daniel



I am making a mistake, Sister Hilda thought, looking at the girl. Somehow I know this is not going to work out.

"I really do want the job, sister. I'm sure I can do the work."

She sounded eager enough — almost anxious. And she looked capable enough, if looks

told anything at all. Twenty-three, perhaps. Tall, long-legged, a bit too thin, but graceful, Sister Hilda thought. Good coordination was important in the kitchen.

"Very well," she heard her own voice saying, "We'll give it a try. Can you start right away?"

"Oh yes. Thank you, sister." Penetrating bright blue eyes met hers for an instant, then slid away. Something evasive there, Sister Hilda thought, and then at once gave herself an inward shake. Really.

There had not been a flood of applicants to choose from, after all. And they badly needed a lay worker—someone to start breakfast each morning while she and the other sisters were at their early devotions. Someone to help on Sundays and generally to lend a hand in the kitchen, where there was never enough help.

She tried to inject a faint note of enthusiasm into her voice. "Fine. We will see you tomorrow then, Karen." Even the name had an odd sound to her ears, a little too exotic, somehow, for the work. She was so used to Mattie Franklin, who had worked here for ten years, and Mattie was such a sound, reliable name, like the person it belonged to.

Still, the first week seemed to go well enough. The girl scraped, washed, and sliced—did what she was asked, performed her job without comment or question. Indeed, Sister Hilda thought her almost too silent and distant. Even though she herself had often had occasion to reprimand the other four nuns who worked under her in the kitchen for too much idle

chitchat, this girl's silence seemed not a peaceful quiet but a withdrawal, an avoidance of all of them, almost a denial of their presence.

Sister Mary Mercy, tall, thin, and sixty, frowned as she mixed shortbread dough with long fingers in a bowl.

"That girl makes me uneasy," she murmured under her breath, and Sister Hilda, standing next to her at the work table, said curtly, "Nonsense. We miss Mattie, that's all."

There was some truth to that. Mattie had left after ten years with them to live with her son and his family in Virginia, and Sister Hilda missed her more than any of them did. She had felt a kinship with Mattie—who was black and a Baptist—that transcended dogmas and differences. She and Mattie had understood each other; they had shared the same feelings about food and the cooking of it. "Just look at that broccoli, sister!" She could still hear the pleasure in Mattie's voice at something Brother Stephen brought in from the garden. "Didn't He make it pretty?" Both of them knowing it was not Brother Stephen she was talking about. Cooking had been, for both of them, a form of prayer.

The new girl brought an uneasiness with her that seemed to lie over the kitchen like a pall, shortening tempers—hers

most of all, Sister Hilda admitted.

"Just look at my parsley!" Sister Mary Mercy had said as she came in from the garden with a handful of green. "Did you know—ancient lore says only the wicked can grow parsley?"

"Really, sister?" The other Mary, Sister Mary Agnes, had stared in fresh-faced disbelief for a moment, then giggled.

"That will do!" Sister Hilda had snapped. "Let us concentrate on our work, please!" And could have bitten her tongue the moment the words were out. Even though she held that idle conversation was a time-waster, she need not have come down so hard on the two Marys, the oldest and the youngest nuns, both so devout and willing. Something was going wrong with the summer, she thought glumly. Something was out of tune.

Sister Bridget, another of the younger nuns, approached her and stood there apologetically. Sister Hilda turned to her.

"Yes?"

"Please forgive me, sister, but Brother Stephen says the buttercrunch lettuce will be bolting if we don't pick the rest of it soon, so I thought perhaps with some spinach added to it and some hard-cooked eggs—"

"Yes, fine. Go and pick what you need."

She watched Sister Bridget slip out the door in her white habit, blue apron, and white headpiece, and sighed. No telling what else she would put in that salad. Sister Bridget was a tireless experimenter. And before joining the order she had not known an egg whisk from a meat grinder. Still, she did seem to have a flair for it.

"Sister Mary Agnes—a dozen eggs, hardboiled, please," she ordered.

She glanced across the kitchen to where Karen was scraping celery and carrots at the sink. The girl was certainly noticeable, she thought, even in the denim skirt and those rather shabby sandals she habitually wore on her bare feet. They were slender, graceful feet, the heels pink and rounded. Her elbows stuck out at odd angles from her body as she worked, giving her a vulnerable look. Not too much dwelling on *that*, Sister Hilda warned herself. She suspected Karen was anything but vulnerable.

No doubt she would work out, the sister told herself, striving for common sense. And summer was after all the best possible time to break in new help. With the school's seventy-five boys away on vacation there were only the twenty-two brothers to feed—those who worked in the vineyard and the winery that supported the school, as well as

those who did the teaching and took care of the business details.

Amadeus, the winery's label, was making a modest name for itself, and so were Sister Mary Mercy's herb vinegars and Sister Augusta's cheeses, which bore the same simple label as the wine—the single word Amadeus standing out on a dark red seal. In summer they all spent more time outdoors, helping Brother Stephen in the garden, giving a little more time to prayer, watching the grapes grow and ripen, looking forward to the harvest, the pressing, the boys' return. That had always been their way. Until this year. Sister Hilda, seeking the flaw in herself, decided she had been too harsh in judging the girl. Missing Mattie, she had been overly critical. It would work out.

She glanced around at the other nuns moving about the big kitchen at their work. Young Sister Mary Agnes putting the eggs on to boil; Sister Mary Mercy patting the shortbread dough into its baking tray; Sister Augusta—sometimes called by the others Sister Gussie—kneading a huge mass of bread dough.

"We do have a dough mixer, you know, sister," she had reminded Augusta that morning. "It isn't necessary for you to do it by hand." But Sister Au-

gusta, who was six feet tall, strong as a welterweight, and also an expert meat-cutter, had answered, "Oh yes, I know, sister. I just like the feel of it."

The sight of them working so silently and soberly now because of her reprimand touched Sister Hilda to remorse.

"Brother Stephen promised us strawberries today," she said. "Did any of you remember? Sister Mary Agnes, after you've put those eggs on, why don't you go out and ask him about them?"

Their expressions lightened with pleasure, not because of the strawberries, she knew, but because they took it as a sign of her returning good humor.

The girl approached her later that day.

"Could I speak to you for a minute, sister?"

Sister Hilda paused in her strawberry-hulling, fingertips pink with juice.

"Yes?"

"I was wondering if you could possibly find someplace for me to stay here on the grounds."

"Here?" The dismay was so clear in her voice that Sister Hilda could hear it herself.

"Well, you know I'm not from around here, and I've been getting a weekly rate at a motel, but it's expensive."

"Surely a small apartment—"

"They're very high, too, and

almost impossible to find. Besides, I thought if I was staying right here I could get an earlier start with things in the morning, and I could afford to take less pay, too."

Sister Hilda's heart plummeted—it would have been hard for her to explain why without sounding impossibly narrow-minded, but she simply did not want this girl around twenty-four hours a day. Yet the school was always short of money; it was the one argument she felt impelled to heed. She was aware of her conscience dragging at her.

"There is a small guest room at the convent—for overnight visitors," she said reluctantly. "I believe I should discuss it with Brother Anselm first, but perhaps just as a temporary arrangement—"

"Oh, that would be fine," Karen said. "I don't mind if it's small."

But I mind, Sister Hilda thought bleakly. Something will be different. Something about the house will change. She had a feeling of dread about it, as if things would become less peaceful—even, somehow, less secure. Well, peace and security were not what she had looked for when she joined the order, Sister Hilda rebuked herself. No one ever promised that a life in His service would be a get-away vacation.

"I will consult with Brother Anselm," she said.

In the end the girl had moved in.

"I was wondering if you would store this somewhere for me."

Sister Hilda paused in the act of dredging meat with flour, holding upraised in her hand the heavy wooden mallet that helped to tenderize the meat. She regarded the suitcase which the girl was holding out to her.

"Store it?"

"Yes. Don't you have a place for storing things?"

"Why not in your room?"

"There's not much space. The closet's small."

Sister Hilda nodded. She knew it was. "There's a storeroom."

"Where is it?"

"In this building. Across the hall from the kitchen."

"Is it kept locked?"

Sister Hilda gave her a stern look. "Yes. But it would be quite safe there anyway," she said coldly. "We don't bother one another's things."

"No, of course not. Well. That would be fine. Thank you."

"Just put it down. I'll take care of it as soon as I'm free." But she sensed the girl's anxiety and so she washed and dried her hands and took the suitcase across to the storeroom shortly afterward, lifting it onto a high

shelf. It weighed more than it should have, she thought.

The food service man came two days later during the quiet mid-afternoon time when Sister Hilda disliked being interrupted. It was the time when lunch was over and all the dishes washed, the kitchen orderly and empty. She would have preferred to spend it in reading and quiet contemplation and prayer, but more often than she liked she had to go to her small office off the kitchen and wrestle with the accounts, pay bills, check the inventory of supplies, make out orders. If ever the books balanced at the end of the month, she considered it a minor miracle, for bookkeeping was not her strong suit. She knew it was taking her twice as long as it should, even with the handy new calculator, and the bifocals she was not quite used to seemed to jumble the figures disconcertingly.

When the knock at the back door to the kitchen came, she was torn between annoyance and relief. She supposed it might be Brother Stephen with some question about what she would like picked for the evening meal.

But the man at the door was a stranger. He wore a short blue jacket; embroidered over the pocket was the name Sid.

"Yes?"

"Good afternoon, sister. I represent the Polar King Food Service Company. Are you the one I should speak with about food supplies?"

"Yes, but at the moment there's nothing we need." Delivery men and salesmen often stopped to try to drum up business, but by and large the Amadeus school bought what it needed from the same local tradespeople who had supplied them for years.

"I see." He seemed not at all discouraged. "Perhaps I could leave some of our brochures for you to read later, then. We're offering a number of convenience-food innovations for institutions such as this, and even though you're not in the market right now, you might be interested in keeping up with what's new."

"I really doubt it," Sister Hilda said wearily. "We grow most of our own vegetables and fruits, and we have an adequate dairy." Still, he was holding out the brochures and it would have seemed rude not to take them. He was not really pushing. His smile was still in place, even though slightly fixed and not exactly warm. How light his eyes were, she thought. She opened the screen door and took the leaflets from his hand, and then he said, "I wonder if I could have a drink of water? It's pretty hot out there today, and

I've got more stops ahead of me."

Her hesitation was brief. "Yes, of course. Come in, won't you?" She glanced behind him to where his truck was parked in the service drive. She remembered the name Polar King. Frozen dinners and such—the sort of thing she and the other sisters had found rampant when they first came here, and had been quick to do away with. He stood, quiet and respectful, while she went to the sink and filled a glass for him. His eyes were taking in the big range, the tall chrome-fronted refrigerator, the huge work table, spotless now and ready for the next meal's preparation.

"You've got a well-equipped place here," he said.

She handed him the glass and he thanked her. And it was just as he was raising it to drink that the screen door was opened again and Karen came in. She was carrying the large flat basket Brother Stephen used for his garden produce. It overflowed with red-tipped lettuce, red radishes and long white ones, Swiss chard, bright orange baby carrots. Karen balanced it on one hip as she managed the door. When she was inside and saw the two of them, she gave a start.

"Oh. Excuse me. The brother out there in the garden asked if I would bring this in."

"Thank you, Karen. Just put it on the counter."

The girl walked past them and put the basket down, then hesitated for a moment and turned back. Sister Hilda, feeling a prick of irritation, said, "I won't be needing you for another hour, Karen."

But the girl did not move. And now Sister Hilda glanced at the man. Over the rim of the glass, the light, near-colorless eyes were looking at Karen. And she was returning the look. Well, Sister Hilda thought, it was natural enough. She had to admit that Karen made quite a sight, coming in that way from the outside with the sun still on her cheekbones, carrying that basket on her hip—it was how an artist would have posed her.

The man handed the glass back and said smoothly, "That refrigeration unit looks as if it would accommodate our Instant Polar Dinners, if you change your mind." His eyes moved back to Karen. "You certainly don't see many institutional kitchens so efficient."

"Thank you," Sister Hilda said shortly. "It functions very well for our needs. I'll be sure to let you know if our requirements change."

"You do that, sister. Thank you for your time."

She closed and locked the door after him. When she turned

back to the kitchen the girl was gone, and distantly she heard the click of the other door that led to the corridor and a side exit. She returned to her office, tossing the brochures aside and settling down to her column of figures once more. She had to go all the way back to the beginning, for her train of thought, fragile and tenuous at best where accounts were concerned, had been completely scattered by the interruption.

Concentration seemed to be harder than ever. She kept raising her head to listen—for what, she was not sure. But small thrusts of anxiety kept knifing at her in the most annoying way. Briefly she thought about strangers entering on pretexts. She got up from her desk and returned to the kitchen. She went to the screen door and looked out toward the drive. The Polar King truck was gone, the drive innocently empty in the sunshine. Bees, tipsy and giddy with June, were busy in the climbing roses that Sister Augusta tended along the wooden fence by the drive. Sister Augusta herself had just come out with her trowel and a fifty-pound bag of fertilizer which she carried as easily as most women carry a handbag.

Sister Hilda turned back to the kitchen. Her eyes fell on the garden basket Karen had placed on the counter near the sink.

And suddenly she knew what was bothering her. It was the look that had passed between the two of them. Not just a man's interest in a pretty girl. Not just her response to such a look. It was recognition. The two of them had recognized each other.

She stood in the empty kitchen that was warm with summer, fragrant with roses and with recent cooking, and felt a chill. The peaceful stillness seemed suddenly oppressive, full of things not seen, half-heard, imagined, lurking. She did not return to her office, but left the kitchen, crossing the courtyard that overlooked the vineyard slopes and entering the small convent building. She went directly to the tiny chapel on the first floor, where the afternoon light held a soft rosy color. Two of the other nuns were there praying, and, surprisingly, so was Karen, sitting in a corner in the back of the room. Karen had never gone there before, to her knowledge. She was not kneeling—Sister Hilda suspected she was not praying either—but she was leaning forward, and her whole body had a look of tension and purpose. Not so much prayerful as poised. For what? Sister Hilda wondered.

She knelt in her customary place, crossed herself, then reached for her rosary. But her

prayers were not peaceful ones, and she could feel, all the time she knelt there, that the girl's eyes were on her.

She had uneasy dreams that night and woke up at her usual hour of five fifteen feeling unrested and fuzzy-headed. Even after morning prayers in the chapel she did not quite recover the feeling of peaceful purpose with which she liked to start the day. The morning was dark and overcast, and a light rain started up just as they assembled to leave the building. Not enough for umbrellas, Sister Hilda decided, and said as she always did, "Ready, sisters?" And precisely at seven o'clock led them across the courtyard to the kitchen.

She had an intuition of something wrong even before going in, perhaps because there was no smell of fresh coffee coming out through the screen. Sister Hilda's lips tightened with censure. Brewing the coffee and getting breakfast preparations under way was one of the duties of the lay worker; Karen would have to be spoken to firmly. Getting an early start on the day was important. Yet Sister Hilda's intuition did not prepare her for the scene that was waiting in the kitchen. As she opened the screen door her breath caught in a sharp gasp.

Devastation and wreckage. Cupboards and cabinets emptied, pots and pans lying on the floor along with canned goods, gallon jars of mayonnaise—one of which had broken. Boxes of cereal, bags of flour, a sugar canister. And in the middle of it all, Karen—scooping, mopping, picking up. For one wild, totally irrational moment the thought sprang to Sister Hilda's mind: it's her fault. Somehow, this is her doing. She put the unworthy notion from her at once and turned to the other nuns, who stood behind her, speechless and wide-eyed with horror.

"Wait here, sisters," she ordered, and went over to Karen.

"You found this when you got here?"

"Yes." The girl was panting slightly: she went on sweeping shards of broken china into a dustpan.

"Why didn't you fetch me at once?"

"I thought I should try to save some of this stuff."

"That could have waited." Was she only imagining it, Sister Hilda wondered, or was the girl avoiding her eyes?

"You found the door open?"

"Yes."

"Forced?"

"I don't know—I suppose so—"

"We must notify the sheriff. And I don't think we should clean up the rest until later. We

must leave it to show Sheriff Tate." She started for her office and the telephone, then stopped and went back to the others. "Sister Mary Agnes, please go and find Brother Anselm and tell him to come. And you'd better tell Brother Francis, too." Briefly, she thought of protocol. Brother Anselm was the director of the school; Brother Francis was in charge of the vineyards. Should one of them call the sheriff? No—neither one was the sort to worry about such things. She glanced at Karen and headed again for her office. There was something in that face, Sister Hilda thought. Some expression—

Over her shoulder she said, "And please, will someone put the coffee on? I believe we will be needing it." She opened her office door and swayed back a step, clutching at the doorknob.

The chaos was just as complete here. File cabinets overturned, papers covering the floor, account books tossed about and lying open, desk drawers ajar—one of them on the floor. Even the grape ivy on her windowsill overturned and lying in a scatter of dirt. Sister Hilda swallowed and went to the phone. Miraculously, it worked.

Sheriff Leo Tate looked around. "Vandalism," he said. "Seen it more times than I can count."

He stood in the center of the wrecked kitchen, hands on hips, his square bulk a comforting presence. He was no stranger to the Amadeus school, since trouble was no stranger to adolescent boys. It was Sheriff Tate who had found Brian Halloran and Eddie Markham on the Hillview Country Club golf course one night, driving over the back nine in an old car owned by Eddie's brother. There had been a small shoplifting incident in a candy store in the village. Both matters quickly put right with the help of the sheriff's mediation before they grew into something ugly. And having become acquainted with the place, now he often stopped and asked, "Everything all right, sisters?" And just as often wound up having coffee and a slab of Sister Mary Mercy's chocolate cake.

Brother Anselm shook his head sadly. A slight, gray-haired man with gold-rimmed spectacles, he was an unusual combination of scholar and hard-nosed administrator, but Sister Hilda guessed that, realist or not, he would be baffled by this sort of thing. "I just can't imagine," he murmured, bearing out what she was thinking.

"Oh, anything's possible," the sheriff said. "I've been in law enforcement long enough to know that. But more often than not the obvious thing is the an-

swer. This looks like vandalism, pure and simple."

Neither pure nor simple, Sister Hilda thought, reflecting on the true meaning of the words and trying to keep at bay a crowd of other more frightening possibilities.

"Anyhow, my man's taken some pictures, just in case."

"Is it likely we'll ever know who did it?" Brother Anselm asked.

"I'll do a little investigating around town—quietly. Sometimes you turn up something that way. But I wouldn't make any bets on it. And even if you do get it as far as the court, if it's kids, their parents will show up with them and the kids will be in suits and ties instead of jeans and T-shirts, and they'll get off with a few stern words."

"Oh well—it's not vengeance we want, of course," Brother Anselm said quickly, lifting both his hands palms up, which seemed to Sister Hilda a particularly touching gesture, indicating that he was unsure of what he did want. And what do any of us want? she thought wistfully. A safe world, and a kind one. Christian charity. Love. But we make do with what we have and try to find grace in it. She glanced at burly, sunburned Brother Francis, who tended the vines, and saw her own anguish reflected in his face.

"I'd better get back to my office," Brother Anselm said. "You'll keep us informed, Sheriff Tate—"

"I will, yes sir."

When the two brothers had left, Sister Hilda asked, "May we clean the place up now, sheriff?"

"Sure."

She moved away from him and gave instructions. "Save what can be saved, and let's try to get things back in order as quickly as possible. We'll plan on using some of the food from the freezer for meals today—it will save time. Some of our casseroles—Sister Mary Mercy, you decide."

The sisters nodded and went to work quietly, Karen along with them.

"Maybe I'd better take another look at your office, sister," Sheriff Tate said when she returned to him. Inside the office he closed the door and said, "Who's the new girl?"

Sister Hilda's heart gave a thump.

"Karen? She's been here two weeks."

"Replacement for Mattie Franklin?"

"Yes."

"Know anything about her?"

"Not a great deal. She's not from around here. But you know our problem, sheriff. It's hard to find good local people. They go to work at the milk plant or

the shoe factory and make more money."

"Any reason to be suspicious of her?"

Had she any reason, Sister Hilda wondered? Beyond resentment and personal pique, that is? Beyond the workings of her own imagination and fancy?

"No," she answered slowly.

"Anything happened that was out of the usual way lately? Any strangers hanging around?"

"Not exactly. Salesmen stop sometimes. There was one here yesterday afternoon. From Polar King—it's a convenience food company."

"Did you know him?"

"No. I gave him a drink of water and told him we weren't interested." She hesitated. "I didn't really—care for his looks. Although that's not fair, because I can't say why."

The sheriff studied her face. "I'll call you if I hear anything."

The call came two hours later.

"Sheriff Tate here, sister. We've just found an abandoned truck pulled off at the side of the road on Route 70. The Polar King company."

"Abandoned—you mean no sign of anyone—the driver—"

"Nope, no one."

By late morning the kitchen was clean and functioning once more. The noon meal was

served in the brothers' dining room on time, their usual buffet lunch, and all the wheels were again turning smoothly, order restored. Sister Hilda worked alongside the others and made no attempt to tackle her ransacked office until the quiet period of afternoon, when she sent them all off and went at it herself. She approached it with a sigh and a prayer, rescuing the grape ivy first. When she had replaced it in its pot and watered it, she swept up the scattered dirt and then for a moment stood surveying the room's wreckage. There must be a right way to go about such a project, she thought, trying to keep despair at bay.

"Can I give you a hand?"

It was Karen, her head sticking around the door which Sister Hilda had left ajar.

"Oh no. No, thank you, Karen. I can manage." Sister Hilda felt the slight stiffening resistance in herself that seemed always to arise when she was around the girl.

"It's really a mess, isn't it?" Karen said, sliding around the door and coming in. She bent down and picked up a manila folder and a rotary file and placed them both on the desk. Then she stooped to gather up a fanned-out handful of receipted bills. "Here. Let me help pick this stuff up anyway. It'll go faster with two of us

working." She lifted the drawer that had been tossed on the floor and brought it around to put back in the desk. Sister Hilda watched her, not moving for a moment, and then thinking an offer of help should not be received ungraciously.

"Thank you, Karen. Perhaps I could use a hand. I'm afraid I don't really know where to start."

But Karen had already started—not waiting for instructions, she was picking up, sorting, assembling, stacking. The mass of files and paperwork that Sister Hilda found so daunting Karen was diving into unhesitatingly. Following her example, Sister Hilda turned to the filing cabinet and began straightening it. For some time they worked side by side, silently. Now and then Sister Hilda glanced at the girl, noting how supple and easy her movements were, how effortlessly she bent to retrieve this or that. Once she knelt on the floor and sat back as she worked. Her feet in their worn flat sandals toed in behind her, giving her a childlike appearance. But she is no child, Sister Hilda reminded herself. She is sharp and quick and knowing. And I cannot make myself trust her.

"This seems to be a current statement from Quality Meat Wholesalers," Karen said, holding up a paper and frowning

with concentration. "Is there a folder for that company?"

"Well, no. Not its own folder exactly."

"It would be easier if there were a file for each company."

"Oh. Well, yes—possibly it would."

"Why don't you hand me one of those empty ones?"

Sister Hilda handed her a folder.

"I'll put everything else in here from Quality Meat too. Now this statement—you must have invoices to check it against—"

"Yes, I daresay I do—somewhere here—" But to herself Sister Hilda admitted, mildly panicky, that even when the office was in order she sometimes had trouble locating invoices. They had such a way of working under the blotter or getting mixed up with the avalanche of bulk mail. Sometimes she did shortcut her bookkeeping by simply paying the monthly statement when it came. Suspicious of the girl, she nonetheless felt on the defensive.

"You do save all the invoices, of course," the girl said, her voice lifting in a tentative question.

"Oh, I do, yes. That is—I try to," Sister Hilda said.

"Because it's important to check invoices against statements. Even with computers,

you know, mistakes creep in. Of course your daily record helps you to remember purchases."

"Daily record?" Sister Hilda's voice had gone bleak.

"Yes. A record of everything received here at the kitchen. Then you'd have a double checking system, and it would be pretty foolproof. And of course it's important to let your suppliers know that you have such a system. It helps keep them honest—which people aren't always."

Sister Hilda gave a long look at the girl, who had never stopped working while she talked. Her thin fingers were flipping through folders, handling those tyrannizing bills with an air of mastery, stacking and folding and arranging, restoring order with bewildering speed. I could never have done it so well, Sister Hilda thought. Perhaps she should make an effort to put this uncharitable suspicion aside. Perhaps it was time for a bit of humility.

"I am not the world's greatest bookkeeper," she admitted.

The girl glanced up at her. She said in her cool distant way, "Not everybody can do everything well. You do other things."

"Still, it is my responsibility."

Karen did not comment. Instead she asked, "How long have you been here? You and

the other sisters?"

"Ten years. Less for some of the younger ones, of course."

"How did they manage before you came?"

"There was a food service, so-called. A great many frozen dinners, a great many meals out of cans."

"Quite expensive, wasn't it?"

"Oh yes. I'm sure we've meant a great saving. What with Brother Stephen's garden."

The two of them went on sorting and putting away. Karen still sat back on her heels, a pile of folders beside her on the floor. Brief phrases passed between them as they handed papers and markers back and forth. Unexpectedly Karen asked, "Are those names your own?"

"Names?"

"Yes. I thought nuns picked special names."

"Oh. That sort of thing's become much more flexible. Some of the older nuns keep the names they had in the order originally. Most of us just use our own."

"Is that what you did?"

"Yes. I was satisfied with it because Hilda was a religious, too, you see. Hilda of Whitby. She was an abbess back in the six hundreds. And they wrote of her that she 'kept a dainty table.' I rather liked that. She had an eye for talent, too. She discovered and encouraged a

servant in her abbey who turned out to be the great poet-singer Caedmon."

"Oh."

It occurred to Sister Hilda that she was talking too much and too foolishly. Still, the girl had asked. No doubt it was the usual curiosity people felt about members of religious communities. Why on earth did they do it—that sort of thing.

"I thought nuns didn't wear habits any more."

"That, too, has become more flexible. Generally we wear what's suitable for the work we do. Those who are out in the world—social workers, some of the teachers—they're much more apt to dress as others do. But here, you see, the habit does suit the work." Sister Hilda glanced down at her white habit and blue apron. "Even the headpiece—actually, for the kitchen it's quite practical."

The girl nodded. When the office was in order, files neatly labeled and stowed away, desk tidy, drawers aligned, it occurred to Sister Hilda that it looked considerably better than it had before the ransacking. She said so to Karen and thanked her. Only after the girl had left her sitting there in the peaceful order-out-of-chaos did the thought come to her that although they had managed to talk together—for the first time—Karen had asked all the

questions. She had been careful not to reveal anything about herself.

Really, I did an inordinate amount of chattering, Sister Hilda thought.

The hour just before dinner was busy in the kitchen. Talk was infrequent but to the point.

"Will we be needing more lettuce?"

"That paring knife, please, sister."

"I do hope that oven isn't overheating again."

Quietly Sister Hilda slipped out of the kitchen and across the hall to the storeroom door. She stood in front of it for several moments and one hand went to her pocket and closed over the ring of keys she carried. Then presently she turned and went back to the kitchen. As she opened the door she saw Karen glance up at her with what seemed to Sister Hilda a narrow, appraising look.

She should have gone to the chapel after the dinner hour, should have tried to find comfort in prayer. She knew that was the right remedy for the unrest she was feeling. But somehow she found her thoughts too frayed and wandering, her nerves too raw and ragged to be contained within four walls. The sense of

outrage and violation was still strong in her. Walking might help to dissipate it, she thought. The early rain had long since cleared off, and now the long summer evening was lingering and drawing itself out into lavender and dark gold. She went out through the kitchen door and along the driveway where Sister Augusta's roses rioted along the fence, on past Brother Stephen's garden where all the early things were flourishing—mustard greens, carrots, radishes, scallions—turning into the driveway which the trucks used to reach the vineyards, walking among the rows of pruned and weeded vines where the brothers had been working that day. She walked quickly, keeping up a steady pace until she began to pant and told herself she could do with a bit more regular exercise. But after turning and coming back she was still unwilling to face the indoors, so she took the turn that led down the driveway to the main entrance and beyond it, to the county road.

She slowed her pace a bit and for the first time began to look around her at the last of the day—"the moth-hour of eve"—wasn't that what Yeats had called it? Everything in nature drawing in, folding itself, waiting for night—all secure in the waiting, knowing they were safe and that night

would come. At the iron gates that were the main entrance to the Amadeus winery and school she lingered, watching the dusk draw in around her. The gates were closed, as they were every evening. She leaned against them, feeling the cool of the iron spokes against her forehead, thinking about comfort and safety and what illusions they were. We are all at risk, every day of our lives, she thought, trying to find her way out of the mood that had wrapped her in gray cobwebs. She lifted her eyes and looked into distance, out onto the county road that led past the gates, across it to a bank thick with new bracken and the rampant weedy growth of June.

Something caught her eye, a bit of blue cloth sticking out of the bracken where a hemlock dipped its branches low to the ground. Part of a garment, she thought idly. Perhaps a sleeve. She narrowed her eyes against the twilight and looked harder.

And saw a hand.

Frantically she dug into her pocket for her keys and found the one for the gate's padlock. She flung the gate open and went running down the slope and across the road, her veil flying out behind her. She scrambled up the bank, slipping some in the still-moist bracken and falling to one knee, but recovering herself and going

on. The hand was outthrust, its palm turned upward. The sleeve's button had been torn away: the cuff hung loose and thready. Sister Hilda steeled herself and slowly lifted the low branch of the hemlock.

It was not the first time she had looked upon the face of death, but death by violence was death of a special sort, and for a long moment Sister Hilda crouched motionless, paralyzed by the sudden blow it had dealt her. Then she crossed herself, let the branch down gently, and went slipping and running back down the bank and across the road to the gates.

The kitchen was empty when she slammed in through the screen door. All the others had gone back to the convent for their quiet hour of reading and conversation. Everything was put away, ready for morning, the room dim with twilight, all the corners in shadow. She made straight for her office and picked up the telephone.

"Sheriff Tate? It's Sister Hilda from the Amadeus school. Can you come out here right away?"

After she had hung up, she stood still beside the desk for a few seconds. Then she turned and hurried through the kitchen, stopping long enough to take a small screwdriver from a drawer, pushed through the door into the corridor and

made straight for the storeroom. This time she did not hesitate, but found the key and unlocked the door quickly.

She reached for the switch and turned on the overhead light, and for a moment stood there facing the detritus and residue of the many lives at Amadeus. Electric fans, plastic-shrouded; Sister Mary Mercy's heating pad, boxed; Brother Francis's bicycle. On a wall hook, Sister Augusta's snowshoes, which she had actually used once when drifting snow had covered the path from convent to kitchen. Slowly Sister Hilda approached the shelf where she had stowed Karen's suitcase, reached up and pulled it down. She put it on the metal table that stood against the wall facing the shelving and reached in her pocket for the screwdriver.

Still she hesitated as catchwords and worn phrases racked around in her head, bouncing hollowly. Privacy and individual rights, presumption of innocence—they were so worn and over-used that their meanings had become blurred. But the meanings were still there, were they not? Was she not making a presumption of guilt? She dropped the screwdriver onto the table with a clatter and pressed both hands to her temples, trying to quiet a throbbing that had started there.

"Why don't you open it?" The voice from the doorway was quiet, but it stabbed at Sister Hilda like an avenging conscience. She dropped her hands and looked up to see Karen standing in the doorway in her blue denim skirt, her bare feet slipped into those scuffed sandals. The overhead light cast lines onto her face that drew down the corners of her eyes and mouth—an odd prefiguring of age. The illusion vanished as she moved a step toward Sister Hilda. She had taken her hair out of its knot and it fell about her shoulders so that now she looked even younger than usual.

"Go ahead. You've been wanting to, haven't you?"

Sister Hilda was suddenly tired; she felt her shoulders slumping and could not seem to draw herself upright. A sharp pain shot through the knee where her habit was muddled.

"What are you doing here, Karen?" she asked quietly. And then, more slowly, "What is it you want from us?"

The girl did not answer at once, but her mouth thinned to a cynical line that was not a smile, yet seemed to hold some bitter amusement. At last she said, "I suppose you might as well know." She took a small key from her own pocket, unlocked the suitcase and lifted the lid. Sister Hilda looked inside, but what she saw was only

a jumble of papers. Some books that looked like ledgers—a pile of computer printout sheets, other papers that might have been statements or receipts. The arcana of business and accounts, in whose precincts she had always been a stranger.

"What does it mean?" she frowned.

"Did you ever hear of the Bannerman Trading Company?"

"No." But she had. Sister Hilda realized it almost at once. Out of the daily bombardment of news in the paper, on the radio, on television, certain words and phrases stuck—half-heard and meaningless out of context. *Bannerman Company investigated; federal government probing massive fraud.* "Yes," she corrected herself. "I have heard that name."

"I worked for them," the girl said. "In the controller's office."

Sister Hilda thought back to that afternoon and saw again the girl's fingers, quick and knowing, as they rifled through the strewn papers in her office.

"And they are being investigated."

"Yes."

Sister Hilda glanced again at the suitcase's contents.

"What you have here is evidence of some sort?"

The girl nodded, and Sister Hilda's mind went darting back over all that had happened the

last two days.

"That man who came here—"

"Hired by the company to find me. I knew it the minute I saw the way he looked at me."

"And the vandalism? Was he really looking for this?"

"He might have been. But maybe he was just trying to frighten me—to remind me that they had tracked me here and that they could find me wherever I tried to hide. I'd talked to a man from the federal government, you see. He asked me to testify."

"But then you ran away."

"I was afraid. All of a sudden I got so scared."

"But you took the books—all these records—you weren't too scared to do that."

"I don't know why I took them." The girl shook her head miserably. "I shouldn't have. If I hadn't done that maybe they would have left me alone."

Sister Hilda strove for reason and pragmatism. "I can't believe," she said slowly, "that a company would react so violently to a mere legal process—" But her voice trailed off as she saw the dead face in the bracken. It had a name now—Sid. The real Sid. The one whose jacket and truck had been stolen. The words *hit man* flashed in her head, garish and neon-lit. Fictional words—no substance to them.

"Oh, sister," said the girl, and

the tone was one of pitying patience for the unworldly. "Do you know how big this thing is? How big the fraud is? Millions. Seven or eight, maybe more. For that kind of money people will do things you've never dreamed of. And I have it all right there. Fraudulent claims of phony accounts receivable put up as collateral for loans. False claims of non-existent assets. And with them they obtained huge loans from banks, which they squirreled away in Swiss accounts—and then declared bankruptcy—"

Sister Hilda's head was starting to throb again.

"A man has been killed," she murmured. "I found his body across from the main gates. I've just now sent for the sheriff."

The girl went suddenly white and leaned against the table. Sister Hilda went on, "I'm sure it's the driver of that truck that was here yesterday. The truck was stolen from him, apparently." She turned away and walked to the small window in the back of the storeroom, her arms crossed in front of her, both hands holding her elbows.

"I thought this would be such a safe place—away from everything—" the girl said.

"We are still in the world," Sister Hilda replied with a touch of acerbity. She leaned against the glass, looking out into the night. The last of the sun was

gone; the night was complete, but a quarter moon cast a pale light. Sister Hilda's back stiffened and her shoulders, which had sagged, grew rigid.

"What car is that?" she asked.

"Car?" The girl's voice was lifeless.

"Parked down there by the service entrance. I don't recognize it."

The dusty storeroom went suddenly silent, but there was a sharpness about the silence that was like glass. A thin, fragile quality, as if it might shatter at any moment into razor-edged pieces. Into the silence came a sound of footsteps, soft and measured, approaching the room. Sister Hilda whirled around to face the door. Karen still clung to the table, looking pale and frightened. The door was kicked open with a crack, and a man stood there holding a gun. Light eyes swept the room just as they had swept the kitchen the day before.

"Karen!" Sister Hilda took a step toward the girl. The arm holding the gun came up and leveled at them. Then there was a dull thud and the man pitched forward, falling slowly and heavily at their feet like a tree felled by an ax.

For a second Sister Hilda stared with horror at the still figure. Then she moved quickly to Karen, who was swaying by the table, trying to hold onto it.

She caught the girl and held her upright, then looked toward the door. Quite unexpectedly, tears sprang into her eyes. She tried to keep her voice calm.

"Sister Gussie," she said, forgetting for the moment how much she disapproved of nicknames. "Please take her for me. She's going to faint." Brakes screeched out by the kitchen door and voices sounded. "I believe Sheriff Tate is here."

The guest room at the convent was certainly tiny, Sister Hilda observed.

Hardly room for bed, chest, and chair, and now she and Karen standing in it seemed a crowd. She watched as the girl packed a few belongings into the open suitcase on the bed. Its former freight of documents was being guarded by the sheriff. The clothes Karen was packing did not fill it.

"I suppose we won't be seeing you again," Sister Hilda said tentatively. "But we will be thinking of you. You'll be in our prayers every day."

The girl's mouth pulled into a faint half-smile. "I hope it helps."

"Sheriff Tate will see that you're delivered to the federal authorities—he said he would. And they've promised to protect you, haven't they?"

"Yes." The thin shoulders

lifted in a faint shrug. "There's nothing else I can do anyway. If they found me here, they'd find me someplace else." She folded a white nightgown and stuck it in the corner of the case. "I imagine you'll be pretty glad to get rid of me."

"You mustn't think that—"

"Well, I brought a lot of trouble with me."

"Trouble is quickly forgotten. And as far as not seeing you again—I only thought that once all this is behind you, you'd be taking up your career again."

"I don't know yet. Sometimes I've even thought I might like to come back here," she said shyly.

"You'd be most welcome."

"I could help to keep your books straight." Now the smile was a real one.

"That would be a gift from heaven."

The girl closed the suitcase and turned to Sister Hilda.

"Well—I just might do that, you know?"

The other nuns had drifted across the courtyard from the convent to stand by the kitchen door as Sheriff Tate saw the girl into the back seat of the car and then opened the front door for himself. Sister Augusta, nervous in the background, edged

forward to speak to him.

"Sheriff Tate, that man I hit—he isn't —"

"No, no. He was already coming around before they took him to the hospital, sister."

"Oh, thank the Lord." Sister Augusta moved back with the others, and the sheriff spoke in low tones to Sister Hilda, who stood a little aside with Brother Anselm.

"Pretty lucky," he said, shaking his head. "That sister coming along when she did."

"It was her overnight oatmeal bread," Sister Hilda said. "She'd come to the kitchen to check on the dough she'd left in the refrigerator. Heard voices, she told me, and then someone coming in the service door, which hadn't been locked for the night yet. God was certainly looking out for us."

The sheriff nodded. "He was, all right. She's got quite an arm on her."

Sister Hilda thought of Sister Augusta, who cared for the roses so gently and baked her bread with such loving care.

"How'd she do it?" the sheriff asked.

Sister Hilda had herself picked up the heavy wooden mallet from the storeroom floor.

"Hit him with the meat tenderizer," she said.

FICTION

Edward

by Grace Ballem

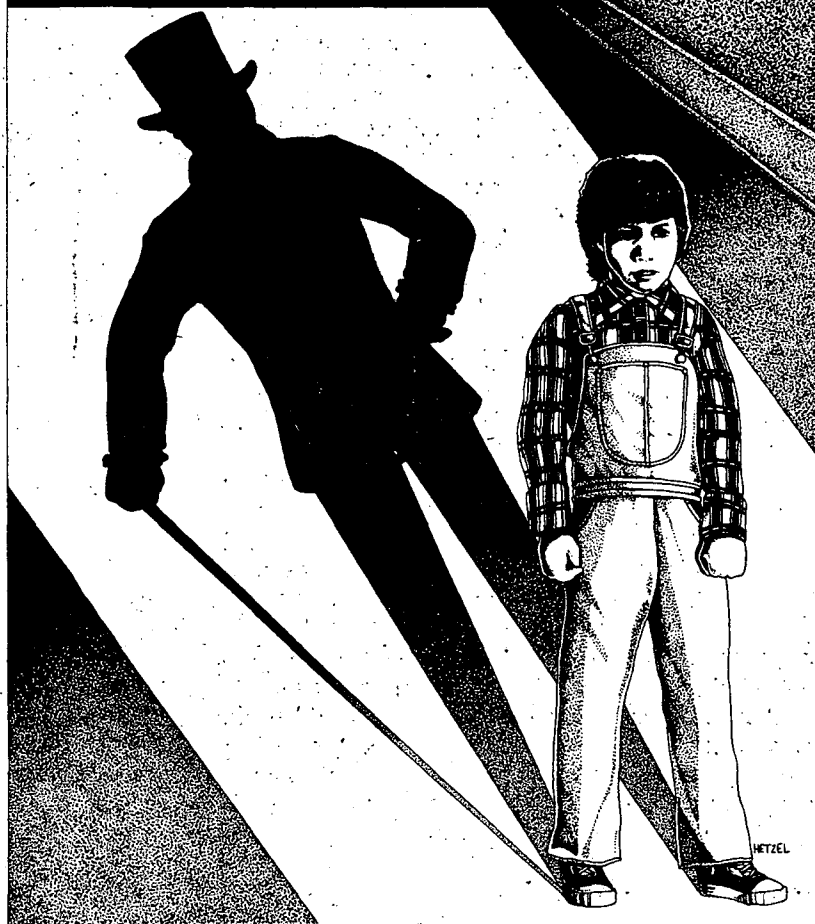


Illustration by Steve Hetzel

Edward died the night I was born. Dad drove Mother to the hospital around eleven o'clock, and when he arrived back home, the police were waiting with Grandma. Edward had taken the turn on the wrong side of the river and he was found slumped over the steering wheel, his small car rammed into a grove of poplars on the bank almost opposite our house. He had been coming from his weekly session at the local beer hall in Cochrane and, considering his condition, the police said it was remarkable he made it back as far as he did.

I never knew Edward, of course, but Margaret did. "I'll no' likely forget the night he arrived," she said. "There was a terrible blizzard and it was bitter cold. When the bell rang, I said to m'self, 'Who can that be on a night like this?' And there he was! He smiled real nice, tapped his suitcase with that cane o' his, and said, 'I've come for a visit. Will someone pay my cab?' And then he walked in. Your grandma was huggin' him and cryin' so hard she even forgot that your ma was just standin' there watchin', until finally your ma had to say for herself, 'I'm Elizabeth.' Your Great-Uncle Edward, peerin' over your grandma's shoulder, looked her up and down, sort o' quiet-like, and said, 'I didn't think my nephew had such good taste.' He smiled when he said it, which took some o' the sting out o' the words, but I could see your ma wasn't much pleased."

Margaret, the youngest of a large Antigonish farm family, had been hired at the time my older sister, Cecily, was born. Mother hadn't had an easy time of it, and I suspect that Dad felt a little guilty that his mother had arrived permanently on the scene so shortly after his move west. Suddenly there seemed to be a number of people who needed extra care. Margaret simply took over, and nothing upset her unless it upset Mother. Therefore, she never liked Edward.

It must have been a difficult time for Mother. She was very beautiful and only twenty-five when Edward arrived. He was barely forty.

"Mister Edward could be charmin', that's for sure," Margaret admitted to me years later. "But your ma would have nothin' to do with him. If he went upstairs, she came down. If he stayed in, she went out. She did her volunteer work, looked after Cecily—who was just a wee thing—and tried not to complain to your father."

Cecily remembered Edward's smile. "His eyes sort of crinkled up at the corners and he looked like a benign cherub."

But a "benign cherub" Edward evidently was not. He had lived

off his aging mother in Halifax until she died and then decided to transfer his dependence to his doting older sister. He was willing to change his address, but not his style of living. In turn, Grandma adored her "baby" brother and would brook no criticism of him.

"Your poor father!" Margaret shook her head sadly. "After all, your grandma and Mister Edward were his kin, and bein' the kind o' man he was, he felt that they were his responsibility. But he dinna' have to like it! When he and your ma were courtin', he never took her to see your grandma without first checkin' to see where Edward was at. She never met him till the night he walked into this house."

And even after he died, Edward was everywhere. The old drawing room was full of photographs of him in silver frames, and he even watched his sister from her bedside table. While Grandma was around, Mother didn't dare move a single picture.

"When Mister Edward died, some o' the life went out o' your grandma," Margaret said. "And when your pa was killed, she sort o' gave up."

It was two years after Edward that Dad died in the TCA crash outside Montreal. I don't remember him at all—I was only two. It was worse for Cecily who was ten, and absolutely devastating for Mother.

In a matter of months, Grandma had the first of a series of strokes. She was in and out of the hospital for the next four years, and Mother didn't have the heart to change anything in the house. Edward's room remained the way he had left it, and his pictures stayed in the drawing room and in Grandma's bedroom to be near her wherever she was. And his ivory-topped cane stood in its accustomed place in the brass umbrella stand beside the front door.

"Until the day they brought your grandma home to die, that is," Margaret said. "And then it disappeared."

Many strange things happened in life, according to Margaret. For as long as I can remember, Cecily and I spent countless winter evenings sitting at the kitchen table while Margaret recited tales from her childhood, and dark spectres drifted past the black windows.

She always began the same way: "The Maritimes have a thousand ghosts. The wild ocean breeds 'em and they live from the wrecks o' ships. Build a house o' wood from the sea, and the Souls of the Lost will surely follow." And while our cocoa formed cold scum in untouched cups, she would tell us of willowy ladies dressed

in white (or black or grey) who floated across the marshes, or cried along the cliffs. We heard about severed hands that groped for lonely riders on deserted lanes at midnight; and shadowy ships doomed forever to sail the endless oceans. The rustling of the mountain ash outside the kitchen window was the sigh of the dead and dying. And finally, Cecily and I would climb the back stairs, giggling to hide our fear, and I would make her go to bed in my room because I was afraid to sleep alone. Years later she admitted that she had been just as scared as I was!

It was the summer I was six that Grandma died. The decision to bring her back from the hospital, and to let her die at home, was really Mother's, for Grandma was herself almost paralyzed by strokes. "It's better this way," Mother said. "She should be with her own." Mother was a Maritimer. She understood.

Cecily was sent to camp, but I was too young. The house was quiet, and I was left on my own. Not that I minded. Our house stood on the north side of the river where the land sloped gently down to the water. At the bottom of the garden was a public foot-path almost hidden by a fringe of weeping birch, giant poplars, and ancient spruce. The narrow bank, lined with leafy bushes, was full of hollows where dolls and stuffed animals could sleep in peace away from the summer sun. Under a rotting stump was a secret schoolroom where I could teach them all I had learned in my first year at school.

On a hot July afternoon, a man came walking along the path and interrupted my spelling lesson. He looked vaguely familiar, with black hair combed flat and a narrow mustache between a long nose and full lips. He carried a cane which he swung back and forth as he walked, and he stopped beside the elderberry bushes to stare across the lawn at our house.

"Hi!" I called, dashing towards him. "That's *my* house. Do you like it?"

He looked at me, smiled quite nicely, and said nothing. Then he turned and, swinging his cane, walked jauntily back along the path until he disappeared around the corner.

I wasn't frightened, but I wasn't used to grownups not answering me. I ran up to the house to tell Margaret.

"There was a man on the river path," I said.

Margaret was making a peach pie, and the peeled fruit lay sugared in a big pottery bowl.

"Lots o' folk use the river. What was he like?"

And I told her. The pastry-cutter stopped in mid-air. At that moment, Mother came through the door from the dining room and saw Margaret standing stiffly beside the counter.

"What is it, Margaret?"

Margaret turned to look at me. "Tell your mother," she said. "Tell her about the man." And then she crossed herself.

Suddenly Mother was holding me tight and I could smell the sweet perfume she always wore. She was shaking, and finally she said, "Run along, darling. Wash your hands and I'll make you some lemonade."

I hugged her and went through the swinging door into the hall. But I stopped to peer back through the crack in the hinges.

"It must be a coincidence!" Mother's voice trembled.

Margaret was carefully kneading the dough. "It's when she was born, that's what!"

"Was she frightened?"

"Not so's you'd notice. But she saw what she saw." She patted the thick pastry onto the floured board.

"Perhaps he's still there! We could get her to show us!" Mother's voice was rising.

"It's better you be knowin' than that, Miss Elizabeth. 'Them' may sometimes be seen by *two* people, but never by three." Margaret reached for the rolling pin and paused to stare out the window. "Tho' I'm wishin' it wasn't the child he picked. It's for sure a fore-runner."

"I won't believe it! And don't you go spreading such foolishness!" There was a no-nonsense quality about her voice, and when Margaret didn't answer, she walked quickly back into the dining room.

I tiptoed down the hall and up the stairs. I washed my hands very slowly.

When I came out of the bathroom, it was in time to see Grandma's nurse swishing down the stairs to have tea with Margaret in the kitchen. I went to see Grandma.

I wasn't really allowed in "the sick room," as Margaret called it, because Grandma didn't look as I remembered her. I shut the door quietly behind me, and I could see that she was sleeping. She lay white and still, her pale hair spread out over the pillow. Someone had placed a hospital table across the bed, and I could see the blue velvet backing of a silver frame that faced her. I moved around to see the picture. It was a closeup of a man with dark hair combed flat, and a narrow mustache between a long nose and full lips.

Then I knew for sure whom I had seen on the path by the river. I looked at Grandma, who had opened her eyes and was staring at me. I reached out to touch the withered cheek. "It's all right, Grandma. It's all right." And then I ran out of the room because I knew I was going to cry.

I saw Edward twice more, but I didn't tell anyone. And nobody asked me. Even then, I must have been aware that Mother really didn't want to know. I suspect that Margaret knew anyway without being told.

The fourth day, Grandma died. I never saw Edward by the river again.

Over the next few years, the house changed. Mother began by cleaning out all the dark Victorian furniture. Then she brought the garden into the house, taking patterns and colors from the wild roses, iris, and daffodils that grew along the riverbank, and the ugly hall panelling was scraped and refinished in the pale shade of new birch leaves. Margaret sulked and muttered amongst the workmen who tore up the kitchen floor, replaced the ancient appliances, and re-did the wiring and plumbing. But she stubbornly refused to let anyone touch her bedroom at the top of the back stairs. "It suits me!" she said firmly.

And then there were the parties. Mother had always been interested in the city's growing awareness of the visual and performing arts. Our house became the entertainment center for visiting musicians, singers, dancers, painters, and sculptors. There were midnight suppers in the drawing room, and in the summer people spread out onto the broad stone patio and down into the garden where soft gas flares lined the path to the river. Cecily and I would crouch in the shadows of the upper hall watching the elegant guests arrive, and far into the night we listened to their lively chatter punctuated by impromptu performances. A new world was opening up for Cecily, and I would often leave her, shining with excitement, still kneeling behind the banister while I crawled sleepily off to bed.

Cecily began to look more and more like Mother. She grew tall and slender, with red hair that framed high cheekbones, and green eyes that flashed with the promise of stunning beauty. I couldn't compete with her. My hair was brown and straight like my father's and for years my nose was too long for my face. In other words, I was Mother's "late bloomer." I was the student of the family, which Cecily certainly was not. I suspect Mother of bribing her to finish

high school with the promise of letting her move to Montreal after graduation. Cecily, to her own way of thinking, had long since exhausted the excitements of Calgary. Initially, Mother tried to control things by insisting that Cecily live with a widowed cousin in Montreal; as it turned out, this was not a lasting arrangement.

For the first while, Cecily's letters were full of new people, new experiences, new glamor. She did some modeling for fashion magazines and television, and eventually settled into a steadier job in public relations. Within six months, she had moved into her own apartment. We didn't know that the rent was being paid for by a married television producer.

I never met Ritch McMichael. He divorced his wife and married Cecily the summer I was eleven. I was too young to really understand Mother's hurt—I thought it all sounded terribly romantic—but they hadn't even asked Mother to come to the wedding.

After that, it was as if Cecily had dropped through a hole in the earth. At first, of course, there were the old excuses of a new life with new concerns and adjustments, but as time went on, Mother's friends kindly stopped asking for news of Cecily. There wasn't any. Mother even swallowed her pride and offered to visit Montreal, Margaret told me, but Cecily put her off on the grounds of her active and exciting life, and promised to let Mother know of a more "convenient" time. Well-intentioned friends who tried to contact Cecily in Montreal were frustrated by an unlisted phone number and calls to Ritch's office that were not returned.

Looking back on those years, I can't help marveling at Mother's tolerance. She even managed to hide from the world her disappointment at the way she heard of the birth of Amy, her first grandchild. Cecily sent a printed announcement. That was all. But eighteen months later when a second card arrived in the mail announcing the arrival of a son, Mother shook her head in bewilderment. "I don't understand!" she said. And I thought she was going to cry. Then suddenly she gasped, "Good Lord! Why in heaven's name would she name the child Edward?"

Margaret, who was standing waiting for Mother to finish opening the mail, took the white card from her and stared at it in disbelief. "She's daft, that's what! No good will come of it, just wait and see!" And with that, she dropped the card on the table and marched through the swinging door to the kitchen.

The next five years were busy ones for me. I finished high school in a blaze of academic glory and plunged enthusiastically into

campus life at the University of British Columbia. The summer after my third year, I came home to find the household in a state of excitement and panic. Cecily was on her way, bringing Amy and Edward with her. Nobody knew what to expect. Even Cecily was someone we weren't sure about any more, and her children were complete strangers. Mother was ecstatic, the years of hurt and heartache forgotten. Margaret was full of foreboding. "It's not right," she said ominously. "Somethin's not right."

I was fresh on the scene—I hadn't caught up on the household news—so I put my arm around Margaret's ample waist and scolded gently, "Now, don't you be a wet blanket. You can see how happy Mother is!"

"Aye," she replied gloomily. "That's part o' my worry!"

As it turned out, there wasn't much about the summer that any of us is likely to forget. It began when Cecily walked in the door and said, "I'm home to stay."

She looked ghastly. Her lovely eyes had lost their sparkle and they stared out of black rings. From my memory of her, she had lost twenty pounds she could ill afford, and her hair was dull and lifeless, pulled severely back into a shapeless knot on her neck. She looked older than Mother.

It was almost as if our front hall was the end of her journey, for she no sooner put down her hand luggage than she started to slowly climb the stairs towards her room, leaving Mother, Margaret, and me standing beside a pile of suitcases and two children who said nothing at all. Amy, whom we had decided was eight, stood tall and straight, achingly like her mother and grandmother. Her hair was red-blonde, hanging thick and straight down her back, tied with a green ribbon that matched her eyes. She wasn't beautiful yet. But she would be. There was no impatience in her stance, but rather the appearance of a child who was forever waiting. Edward, on the other hand, was small for his age, with too much black, unruly hair for the size of his head. His eyes were black, too—or so they seemed—active and beady, darting all over the hall, looking for an escape. In the quiet of the moment, I wondered uneasily if he were attached to a coiled spring. I was soon to know. Suddenly, without warning, he let out an earsplitting shriek and began turning in circles, arms outstretched until, in apparent imitation of a jet in flight, he took off with appropriate sound effects through the swinging door to the breakfast room. The rest of us were momentarily stunned. Except for Amy. The calm look on her little face

said that Edward's strange behavior was nothing new. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Margaret take a tentative step towards Amy. Mother was still standing in the middle of the hall staring at the empty staircase. I took off after Edward.

I found him wrenching at the handle to the french doors leading out onto the patio. The way he was jerking at it, I was sure the handle would come off in his hand. Or the glass panes would break with the vibration.

"Edward! Edward!" I called, reaching out to touch him. "The door is locked! Here—let me open it for you."

It was as if he hadn't heard me. His face was contorted with anger and the effort of yanking the door. "I wanna go out! I wanna go out!" His voice was pitched high with threatened hysteria, and he spun away from my hand. Then as quickly as the scene had begun, it ended. The door didn't seem to matter any more. Instead, he ran over to the built-in cabinet on the opposite wall and systematically opened all the drawers. He used one hand to pull them open and the other to rummage through their contents, one after the other: the cutlery, a pile of glass ashtrays, and the neatly stacked table mats. When one of the ashtrays poked above the rim of a drawer, he slammed it viciously, marking the paint at the top of the frame and then, with a shrug, walked calmly out of the breakfast room, leaving the rest of the drawers open.

The next month was almost impossible. Cecily spent most of her time in her room, while the rest of us tried to occupy a restless, moody Edward. He seemed totally undisciplined, and he exhausted us all with his recurrent tantrums. He made a permanent enemy of Margaret. Shortly after his arrival, she caught him in her bedroom going through her drawers. We brought in a locksmith to put a new bolt on her door, and she carried the key on a string around her neck. Another day she left six tomatoes to ripen on the open shelf of the back porch, and when she went to check them, they were crushed and trampled into the indoor/outdoor carpeting. Edward denied having anything to do with it, but Amy said softly to no one in particular, "He tells lies."

The gardener hung a tractor tire as a swing from the big elm at the side of the yard, but Edward was quickly bored with it and decided to climb the tree instead. Margaret and I were in the kitchen when he started screaming. Fortunately, he hadn't climbed very high before he fell, so that the noise was far out of proportion to the pain. On the other hand, he was probably frightened, and

the volume certainly attracted our attention!

Amy attached herself to Margaret. I would go into the kitchen and find the two of them sitting at the long wooden table (Margaret wouldn't let it go with the renovations) sharing a plate of warm cookies and a pitcher of lemonade. I found myself smiling and thinking, "Amy, my girl, you are just one mid-winter's evening away from headless horsemen and willowy ladies who float around in the night!"

At other times, Margaret would wind an apron around Amy's slim waist, and they would knead dough or peel vegetables or mix meatloaf together, mostly in silence. Amy did not chatter. She only spoke when she had something to say. "Too quiet by 'alf!" was Margaret's judgment. But, I thought, with Edward around, there weren't many silences for other people to fill.

Cecily had arrived at the beginning of June. By the end of the month, she still had made little effort to help us with her children, and Mother, Margaret, and I were all showing signs of strain. The first week in July marked the beginning of the famous Calgary Stampede, and I was already mentally programming Edward and me through the rodeo events and the midway—if only to give Mother and Margaret a much-needed break. But I think that Cecily, who was seldom seen other than at dinner, was beginning to sense a brewing family crisis. Mother announced firmly on a Friday morning at breakfast that she was going to "speak to Cecily" sometime over the weekend. "Goodness knows," she said, "we were all prepared to help. But this is ridiculous! She has to take *some* responsibility. And, particularly, she has to get a grip on Edward. There's got to be something the matter with the child, and the sooner she finds out what it is, the better it will be—for all of us."

I silently echoed her sentiments, but at the same time, I wasn't going to pin my hopes on Cecily. Therefore, it was a complete surprise to come down for breakfast the next morning and to find Cecily already dressed, sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, talking quietly, though pleasantly, to a stunned Margaret.

"Walk along the river with me?" she asked, and she looked as if she were pleading with me not to refuse.

I had to admit that the month's rest had done her good. Perhaps it was Margaret's anxious cluckings and scoldings—and her cooking—but the circles had disappeared from Cecily's eyes and her cheekbones weren't quite so prominent. We walked around the bend of the river path until the house was out of sight, and then

sat down on the grassy bank.

"Ritch never intended for us to marry," she started abruptly. "Why should he? He had me with no strings attached, he was divorcing his wife so that he would soon be free. But I knew his one weakness: he wanted a son. His wife had never been able to have children. And so I became pregnant."

It didn't take much imagination to write the rest of the scenario. Ritch married her, of course, but Cecily's plot had an unexpected twist: the baby died.

"She didn't live very long. She came too early. I named her Elizabeth."

Ritch's devotion rose and fell with the tides of his fortunes. Amy and Edward were conceived in the wake of successful shows, but in between, Cecily faced long periods of loneliness and neglect.

"Of course Ritch was disappointed when Amy was born. But," and she laughed bitterly, "he didn't know when he was well off! Edward isn't exactly the son he had in mind! He cried constantly, right from the beginning, and wouldn't let his father near him without screaming the house down. Ritch began to spend more and more time away from home, and somewhere along the line—I don't remember exactly when—I knew he was seeing someone else. Someone without a screaming child. Someone who wasn't always exhausted."

The fact that the story was a familiar one didn't make it any easier for me to hear. I didn't want the main character to be my once-beautiful sister.

Cecily continued. "I hung on. God knows why. But the 'other woman' played the same game I had—she's pregnant now, and I don't have a choice any more."

I wished I had time to think, but I didn't. "What about Edward?" I asked bluntly.

Her long fingers pulled at a tuft of grass, and then she looked up at me. "I don't know. I honest to God don't know!" and her voice was suddenly ragged with strain. It occurred to me then that if Mother, Margaret, and I had struggled with Edward for a month, what sort of hell had Cecily been through for the past seven years? I decided right then to take matters into my own hands. Edward needed a doctor. As if she was reading my mind, Cecily said, "Ritch would never acknowledge that there was anything wrong with Edward—except Edward's mother. And after a while I began to think that, too."

"Oh Cecily!" I reached out and touched her hand. "We'll do something about him, I promise!" It was all I could think of to say.

Cecily got up and turned away from me towards the house. She didn't say anything, and I wondered if it was just that she didn't dare hope any more.

The next day, Amy saw the man by the river for the first time. Common sense told me that it couldn't be Edward in spite of Amy's detailed description. She had never seen the pictures of him—I had helped Mother pack them away after Grandma died. But I didn't dare say too much because I remembered that I had seen Edward three days in a row.

On the second day, Cecily took Edward to the zoo and I took Amy for a long walk beside the river. When the man didn't come, I was relieved—until I was putting Amy to bed.

"The man was there again," she said.

I tried to smile. "I didn't see him, dear."

"You weren't there. It was after. When I followed a black squirrel down to the big trees."

I was speaking very calmly. "Did you talk to him?"

"Oh no! He wasn't even looking at me. He was looking at the house."

I went to see Margaret—to tell her about Amy and to remind her that I had seen Edward three times before Grandma died. I was thoroughly frightened. "Something's going to happen! What if she sees him again tomorrow? And what about the day after *that*?"

"It's not given to us to know." Margaret's voice was tired. "But I dinna' like it! Mister Edward, God rest his tortured soul," and she crossed herself, "should have been content with his sister, but it's for sure he's not restin' easy yet!"

"It can't be Amy," I said, attempting some sort of logic. "When I saw him, it wasn't me he wanted. And Amy said he wasn't even looking at her. It's this house all over again!"

I had poured myself a cup of coffee, and I shivered as I closed my cold hands around the hot mug. "Oh, Margaret! Is Edward going to wander around out there forever?"

Margaret shrugged. "It's given to few of us to see the dead or hear the banshee wail. But when you think on it, Amy comes by it honest enough."

"But was Mother like this?" I asked.

"Who can tell? She's a close one, your ma. She'd never say. But

she comes from the Maritimes, and folk there are a wee bit different, oft as not. Your grandma was fey, that's for sure. Why, she told me o' the time she woke in the dark o' the night, cold and scared, and she called out to your grandpa even though she knew he was away at the war. Later she found out that it was the night he was gassed at Vimy Ridge."

I had never heard the story. "Well, what can we do?"

"The same as we did when it happened to you. We'll be waitin' again, won't we."

The way she said it, it was a statement, not a question. Margaret spoke straight out of the Scottish counties of Nova Scotia, and the ghosts of the sea walked invisible beside her acceptance.

"I'll stay with Amy all tomorrow!"

"Suit yerself. Won't do an ounce o' good. He'll wait till you're gone. But I dinna' think he'll hurt the lass."

Margaret's philosophy didn't comfort me a bit, but I didn't try to press her further. I left her in a silent mood—both of us busy with our thoughts. That night I lay awake for a long time, trying to reason with my fear.

Edward wouldn't want Mother. She was too level-headed for the likes of him, and besides, she probably humiliated him more than once. Margaret had disposed of the possibility of Amy, and I was inclined to agree with her. Cecily? I hardly thought so. She was not the pliable child he would remember.

Edward—the second Edward! Suddenly I sat up in bed and cried out loud, "Oh no!" I was afraid, but I was angry, too. "Don't you touch Edward! Go back where you belong! You don't need him! *Go back!*" And the dark walls mocked me.

In the morning, I took Amy shopping. It rained, and so we cancelled plans to go to Heritage Park. Since I had taken the first step and made an appointment with a pediatrician for Edward the following week, Cecily seemed to decide to be of some help to the rest of us, and she had gone off with him to a science fiction movie. They weren't home when Amy and I got back in the early afternoon. A watery sun shone dully through the grey clouds, and I debated whether to go down to the river with Amy, or wait in the house for Cecily and Edward. In the end, I let Amy go alone.

It wasn't long before she came through the screen door into the kitchen, carrying a pair of muddy sneakers. "I stepped in a hole," she said.

"Did you see the man today?" I asked, ignoring Margaret's frown.

"Oh yes," she said, climbing on the stool to reach the cookie jar. "I do wish he'd talk to me."

"It's probably just as well." I shrugged my shoulders as if I didn't really care. "He doesn't sound too friendly anyway." I didn't dare look at Margaret.

I wondered if it would have made any difference if Amy had been able to make Edward speak. I hadn't told Amy, of course, but the spirit world is supposedly condemned to silence unless God's name is called in the greeting.

That night my stomach was tied in knots, and I picked at my dinner. But I appeared to perk up as I said, "I've got an idea! It's supposed to be sunny tomorrow, so let's go to the park, have a swim, and watch the afternoon baseball game!" Mother looked down the table at me in a puzzled way, and I knew my voice was pitched too high and I spoke too quickly.

Edward saved me. He jumped out of his chair and ran around the table whooping with excitement. He thought it was a marvelous idea, and I thought it might even coax a few extra moments of good behavior from him. But the immediate result was to end the possibility of his finishing his dinner, and Cecily, with a sigh of resignation, took him by the hand and led him, still jumping and shouting, out of the room.

"Whatever possessed you, my dear?" Mother asked, shaking her head.

"Sorry. I thought it was an inspired idea."

Eventually, Cecily helped in the kitchen and I put the children to bed. I didn't want to talk to Margaret that night nor, I suspect, did she want to see me.

I went to bed early, tense with plans for the next day. I wasn't going to leave Cecily, Amy, or Edward alone for a moment. I think I really believed that if I could break the pattern, I would solve the problem. At any rate, I didn't see any alternative.

It was late when I fell into an exhausted sleep, heavy with nightmares of rows of ivory-topped canes that moved across endless rivers to the rhythm of a banshee's wail. I watched the beginning of the day through a crack in the curtains, and finally got dressed for a breakfast I didn't want.

I had it alone with Margaret, the two of us hunched over the kitchen table, locked in our own thoughts.

Cecily came down grumbling that Edward had wakened her at the crack of dawn with his noise. At any other time, I might have

taken pity on her and volunteered to take the children for the day. But I wasn't sure enough whom Edward was looking for. I couldn't let even Cecily out of my sight.

"Come on!" I urged. "It's a beautiful day! Margaret and I will pack a lunch while you get the kids ready and try to keep them amused for a while.

And she managed quite well. By delaying things as long as possible, we didn't start down the street to the park until after ten o'clock. Most people wouldn't arrive until closer to noon, so that we were able to choose a pretty spot on a grassy bank shaded by two huge weeping birch trees. Besides, the pool was near, which made it easy to keep track of Edward, and he had lots of activity to watch even when he wasn't in the water himself. Amy had withdrawn into her quiet self, which she always did on outings with Edward. She was a perceptive child and seemed to realize that we had to concentrate most of our attention on her brother. I could never tell if it bothered her.

By noon, Cecily was wilting. But I opened the picnic basket, and for a while, things were relatively peaceful. Edward munched away on his sandwich watching a group of older children in the pool. When I sensed he had reached the end of his tether, I suggested we pack up and walk down the edge of the park to the baseball diamond. There were informal games almost all day.

It was growing hotter. The ice cream from the catering truck ran down the children's fingers and formed puddles on their clothes. But I didn't care. Edward loved baseball, jumping up and down, yelling with enthusiasm. Amy was bored stiff. Cecily sat absolutely still, looking as if she wished she were home in bed. I knew how she felt.

Eventually, the game ended. Edward ran circles around me going out of the park, chattering with excitement, and I tried to listen to him. Amy and Cecily walked slowly behind.

At the edge of the sidewalk, Edward turned back towards Cecily. Amy caught up to me and we could hear Edward describing the game all over again to his mother saying, finally, "And that's when they really won the game! It was the last run of the eighth inning! I wish I knew which bat he used!"

I took Amy's hand to cross the street. In the middle, she suddenly stopped, staring straight ahead of her. I looked, too, and saw the other Edward standing about twenty feet in front of us. He was leaning on his cane, watching something behind us. For a moment

I couldn't move. Then I spun around. Cecily was standing on the sidewalk directly across from the entrance to the park. Edward was nowhere in sight. Suddenly he came out of the park gate, running with short, choppy steps that didn't stop at the edge of the road. Cecily began to scream. The car was coming very fast around the corner, three young faces frozen in horror visible through the windshield. There was the shrill sound of locked brakes and a dull thud, and Edward was thrown into the air and onto the road in a tangled heap. He was on his feet in an instant, running down the road towards us, his arms waving like crooked windmills and his thin legs pumping in aimless rhythm. His mouth was open and his face twisted in agony. Amy let out a high-pitched shriek, "Catch him! Catch him!"

I ran with outstretched arms to grasp him. But he slipped through my fingers and I heard his harsh gasps as he passed me. I turned to follow him, but I stopped when I saw the older Edward, kneeling in the middle of the road, holding his cane in one hand, his arms open to take the child. He picked him up, looked past me for a moment, and turned to go. I called out then, sick and angry, "Oh God! No!"

Edward looked back at me, startled and a little hurt. His voice came soft and clear from a long way off, "Goodbye, my dear." He put his cane carefully on the ground, and kicked it so that it rolled towards me along the street and stopped at my feet. And, with the child's head still buried in his shoulder, he turned his back and walked away.

I stared at the cane and finally bent to pick it up. In that moment, there was a long and hollow cry that filled the street with pain. Cecily was crouched over the shapeless bundle that had been her son. I tried to hand the cane to Amy but she shook her head, her eyes wide with shock. So I simply said, "Go home, Amy, and tell Margaret."

And I threw the cane, end over end, until it came to rest on the grass beside the curb. Then I walked down the road towards my sister.

FICTION

A Bad Day For All Concerned

by
**James
A. Noble**



Officer John Burrell didn't mind taking a new rookie out on patrol. He appreciated the company, since he normally worked his beat alone. The other patrolmen, particularly Cliff Barnes, had warned John. Someday you're going to depend on one of those green kids in a life or death confrontation and you'll end up on a slab, they said. He realized it could happen. That's why, whenever he had a rookie in the squad car, he answered his calls with one philosophy in mind: pretend you're going it alone until the kid proves himself consistently

in at least a half dozen critical situations.

He looked over at his latest pupil, Tommy Holt. "Want to drive for a while, kid?"

"Yes, sir. Thanks."

"The name is John. And don't thank me. You'll be sick of driving soon enough."

John Burrell hoped it would be a good day. A bad day for a policeman in this part of town could be his last one.

"There's just no way I can sneak that much money out today, Harvey. It's Friday, a payday. The bank will be packed."

"Susan, listen to me. Big Louie

isn't going to wait any longer. It's now or never. I've got to pay off those gambling debts today."

Susan Howard sighed deeply.

"Louie isn't going to just break my arm," Harvey warned her. "He'll kill me, baby. Is that what you want?"

"No, of course not," she replied.

"How's that false back in the cash drawer been working?"

"Just fine."

"And you've been sticking in it the cash deposits from those fat cats with the semi-annual statements?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, think about it. There's got to be better than thirty grand in there. The statement period's coming up soon, that false compartment is getting jammed full of big bills. You can pocket all the big deposits for today and empty the compartment. We'll pay off Big Louie and skip town. Don't you and the other tellers get a break?"

"Sure."

"Good. You take that big purse of yours to the bank, load it with the money, and split during the break."

"It might work at that," said Susan thoughtfully. "But why give Louie any money? Why don't we just blow town?"

Harvey Winters shook his head. "No way. We can hide from the law, but not from the

syndicate."

Susan sighed again.

"Honey," pleaded Harvey, "they'll kill me if I don't have their money today."

She turned and started walking upstairs.

"Where you going?"

"To get my big purse."

"That's my doll."

Benny Arnold sat quietly in Murray's office and waited. Murray always called people into his office and let them sit for a while. It was a habit Benny had gotten used to.

Murray set aside some papers he was reading. "How many cars you steal for me this week?"

"Three?" ventured Benny.

"Two," said Murray. "And junk at that. What's your problem?"

"It's them funny steering column locks and all them wires. It's getting harder and harder to hotwire that expensive late model stuff."

Murray stood up and walked to the office window overlooking the garage.

"I've got a good operation here, Benny. The best bodymen, the best painters, and the best car thieves. We can steal 'em, change 'em, and sell 'em in two hours. Every man knows his job and does it well . . . except for you. You're a bottleneck in my operation, Benny. I don't need bottlenecks. I need cars."

"Today, I swear. Today."

"You'd better, because if you don't, you're through. You understand?"

Benny nodded.

Murray pointed to the door.
"Get out on the street."

George and Larry stopped playing poker when they saw Rocky walk in.

"Clear the table," said Rocky, unrolling the floor plans. "All right, this is how it'll go down. We hit the place at one o'clock in broad daylight. They'll never expect that. Larry, you'll take care of the guard and cover the main entrance. George, you and I will leap the counter here and here and clean out the cash drawers, but no more than two minutes' worth."

"What about the vault?" asked George.

"Forget it," said Rocky. "We want to be in and out as fast as possible. Someone's going to set off the alarms, so no fooling around. It'll be payday, so if we hit the tellers' stations, we ought to bring home a bundle."

"And the security cameras?" asked Larry.

"Stocking masks," said Rocky, pulling three from his pocket. "George, you steal a car. Something plain and fast. We'll leave it in the side alley, next to the bank. Any questions?"

Larry and George said nothing.

"Good," said Rocky, smiling.
"Let's get ready."

Susan Howard looked back at the clock on the wall. One o'clock, time for her break. The cash deposits had been good today, and she had been careful to put only the large denomination bills in the false compartment in the back. Harvey had been right. The compartment wouldn't hold much more. It was time to empty it and slip away. She reached for the cover to the compartment.

Suddenly a man wearing a stocking mask vaulted the counter, startling her. The cover popped free from her hand and landed on the floor.

"Back away from the counter, lady," said George, waving his gun.

For a moment she hesitated and the gunman pushed her aside with one hand, reaching into the drawer with the other. The big bills from the secret compartment had spilled out into the drawer.

"Holy cow," yelled George, holding up a handful of money for Rocky to see. "There must be twenty, thirty thousand in this drawer."

Rocky stood awestruck until the alarm started to ring. "Good enough. Grab it and let's go."

Larry covered his accomplices until they were out the

front door, then he turned and followed.

Susan suddenly felt the presence of someone standing next to her. It was the vice president of the bank.

"The police will want to see you when they get here, Susan," he said coldly, looking down at the secret compartment.

Larry and George ran into the alley and smack into Rocky's back. Rocky had removed his mask and was looking up the empty alley. He turned slowly to George. His jaw hung limp.

"Where'd the car go, George?" The words were barely audible. George only stared, wide-eyed.

"Where's the car?" Rocky yelled.

"I . . . I don't know," replied George. "I left the engine running for a quick getaway. Someone must have stole it."

"Let's get out of here," said Rocky in disgust.

"There's the bank up ahead," said Officer John Burrell. "Did you see those three men head into that alley?"

"Yeah," replied Tommy.

"Drop me off just after the alley, then get the car around the block and shut off their escape from the other side."

Tommy slammed on the brakes and Burrell jumped from the squad car before it had even

stopped. The rookie was back on the accelerator in an instant, and the car careened around the corner.

Burrell pulled out his service revolver and crept up to the corner of the bank building. He peered down the alley. Three men were running toward the opposite end.

"Freeze! Police. Drop your guns."

Two of the men stopped and let their guns fall. The third man kept going until the squad car suddenly appeared at the other end of the alley and came towards him; then he complied.

The rest was routine. After the backup units arrived, the two officers took statements from several witnesses and, to their surprise, ended up arresting a bank teller for embezzlement. Within an hour they were back on patrol.

"How about that one, huh, Murray?" Benny said, grinning like the proverbial cat.

Murray stared out of the office window at the car Benny had just brought in. "Not bad, not bad. I don't see how you stole it, though, unless somebody left the keys in it for you."

Benny giggled. "Better than that. They left the engine running."

"That wasn't too smart. When somebody leaves the engine running, it usually means

they're making a quick stop at the drugstore or something and that means they're going to be right back out. You might have been caught."

Benny stopped smiling but said nothing. Suddenly one of the bodymen opened the office door.

"Boss, you'd better come out here and look at this car Benny just heisted."

Murray was out of the office in a flash, with Benny at his heels.

"What's the matter?"

"Look in the trunk," said the bodyman.

Benny never got a chance to look. Murray grabbed him by the collar and held him against the side of the car.

"Get a couple of the boys and wipe this car clean," he said to the bodyman. He turned and put his face close to Benny's. "Now, you listen and you listen good." Benny could hear his teeth grinding. "Put on your gloves, get in this car, and get it out of here. Then don't you ever come back. Do you understand?"

"Where d'you want me to take it?"

"I don't care. Bury, burn, or eat it. Just get it and you out of here."

The rookie was still excited by the holdup. "Can you believe that," said Tommy, shaking his

head. "The bank robbers exposed an embezzler."

"Funny world," said Burrell.

"Hey, look at that car coming towards us," said Tommy, pointing. "Isn't that the vehicle a couple of those witnesses described? The one that was parked in the alley just before the holdup?"

"Sure is."

Tommy reached over for the lights and siren switches. John Burrell grabbed his hand.

"Hold it, kid. Call it in and let's tail 'em."

It turned out to be the right decision. The rest of their shift proved very interesting.

When they returned to headquarters, they had to fill out several reports, so it was quite late before they finished. John went down to the locker room while Tommy turned the forms in. Cliff Barnes was there suiting up for his tour. Cliff was a good patrolman but he tended to be a little negative and sarcastic. As a result, John kept any conversation to a minimum. This time, however, it was not to be. Tommy came barreling through the door looking excited.

"Hey, John, guess what? I just heard the captain's going to put us in for a commendation."

Cliff laughed. "What happened, sonny? Did you manage to drive the squad car all day

without running over anybody?"

Tommy folded his arms over his chest. "Gee, I don't know, Cliff. Maybe it was those three bank robbers we nabbed today . . . or it could have been that embezzler we arrested. . . . Naw, it must have been the car thief we caught. What was his name, John?"

"Benny Arnold, but I don't think that was the reason. I'm sure it was closing down that hot car ring Benny told us about when we pumped him."

Tommy nodded. "Yeah, we were sure lucky Benny was on the outs with the leader of that operation. In fact, we were lucky he tried to dump the car on the street when he spotted us and ran through that laundromat."

Cliff wasn't laughing any more.

"You're right, Tommy," said John. "Did you see the expressions on those bookies' faces when we crashed in the back door after Benny and caught them red-handed?"

"They didn't get a chance to burn a single betting slip," laughed Tommy. "That was one of Big Louie's gambling joints, wasn't it?"

"Ah, come on, rookie," said Cliff. "You're pulling my leg. He is, ain't he, John?"

Burrell took his time button-

ing up his shirt. "Go read the reports."

Cliff looked from one man to the other and then stormed out of the locker room.

"You did good today . . . rookie," said John, laughing. "Hop in your civvies and I'll give you a lift home."

Tommy became somewhat pensive after they left the station and headed down the road.

"Tell you what," said John. "We'll stop off at Arnie's. I'll spring for a beer."

Tommy grinned briefly but said nothing.

"What's the matter, kid?" asked John.

"It's the dead man we found in the trunk of that hot car. I wish we could have solved that one, too."

"Didn't I tell you? The detectives figured it out. They found a whole bunch of old betting slips in the bookie joint we closed, indicating the dead guy owed a fortune in gambling debts. Big Louie is going to burn for murder."

"Who was he? The dead man, I mean," asked Tommy.

"Some guy named Harvey Winters. Guess this wasn't his lucky day."

"Boy, it was a bad day for everyone concerned."

"Only for the criminals, kid. Only for the criminals."

OFF THE RECORD

The Mystery of the Haunted Houses by C. Bruce Hunter



They just keep coming—all those haunted houses with their cobwebbed corners and creaking floor boards, their maze-like hallways and large, drafty rooms. It's hard to name a long-running mystery series—either print or video—that doesn't contain at least one haunted house story. And even when the house itself isn't in sight, the more general form of the story, featuring some unseen threat and exuding a strong hint of the supernatural, surfaces again and again.

Dashiell Hammett broke away from his usual fare of hardboiled detectives to give us a family curse. Starsky and Hutch occasionally ran up against witches and Satan wor-

shippers. Even Agatha Christie was not averse to slipping us a taste of the supernatural from time to time.

At first this constant intrusion of ghosts and goblins into the orderly world of logic and clues may seem a bit odd. After all, mystery stories are not fantasies. Nevertheless, haunted houses have been a standby of the genre since its inception.

Even mystery writers who are known almost exclusively for their realistic stories and characters often take side trips into the fields of the bizarre. Conan Doyle is a prime example of a mystery writer who was inclined to turn out plain old horror stories. And let us not forget that the very inventor of the detective yarn is best re-

membered for his ghosts, ghouls, and ravens.

To some extent, this is merely a historical phenomenon. Victorian stories, for example, flirted with the supernatural as a result of the widespread interest in spiritualism that characterized that period. Still, the persistent appearance of spooks in the genre clearly involves more than an accident of history. So why does the supernatural keep popping up?

To be sure, dark scary houses are inherently mysterious, but much more than that seems to be afoot here. It takes something very basic to cause two so apparently different elements to intertwine through the years. Fortunately, this remarkable sub-genre offers us a few clues to the mystery of all those haunted houses.

The first clue—and one that requires a little investigating—is the connection between the haunted house and the “locked room.” In the standard locked room story, the supernatural is always an implicit possibility, but if it is brought up at all, it is seldom exploited as anything more than a red herring. If we look below the surface, however, we see that the important connection between the two is that they feature the same kind of puzzle.

In each case the object of the puzzle is to discover the *real* solution. Now, as everyone knows, that's the point of all whodunits, but that isn't what we're talking about here. Both locked rooms and haunted houses go far beyond the run-of-the-mill red herrings. In these specialized mystery forms, the situation the author presents to us is patently impossible. Reason rebels against the “known facts” of the plot, giving the reader a heightened desire to find out what unexpected piece of reality lies behind the face of the crime. This is the common denominator of the locked room and the haunted house. In this respect, the only difference between the two sub-genres is that in the scary mansion the face of the crime is that of a ghost.

Which brings us to the second clue. One of the most basic elements of a supernatural yarn is the looming presence of evil. Again, all mysteries have their bad guys; it's one of the prerequisites of the job. But in a haunted house, the villain is a much more imposing figure. He is the unknown, malevolent presence, which is guaranteed to be more frightening than any human culprit lurking in the shadows.

Part of the appeal of suspense

stories has always been their escapist value. They allow us to get away from the daily grind to a place where bullets fly with greater than average frequency. It's fun to follow spies and detectives and master jewel thieves to romantic places where they meet with adventure and danger.

If done well, a hint of the supernatural can make those adventures even more exciting. Not only will the protagonists face dangers the rest of us are unlikely to encounter; they will actually find themselves in situations we cannot experience (we hope). And more's the fun.

This is the thrill of watching the trained athlete make a spectacular catch, of hearing the virtuoso hit an impossibly high note. It is the accomplishment we enjoy all the more because we can experience it only vicariously. We instinctively admire what we cannot do for ourselves; otherwise there would be no fine restaurants. And the haunted house—not the one in our home town that is *supposed* to be haunted, but the fictional one where things really *do* go bump in the night—is one of those experiences that is forever just beyond our reach. In the final analysis, it is that elusiveness which makes the experience, vicarious or not, all

the more attractive.

In addition, a hint of the supernatural actually complements the traditional whodunit. Rather than detracting from the standard elements of the genre, a haunted house amplifies them, takes them a step further.

Consider, for example, one of the staples of this sub-genre: the closed door. (Quick! Try to name a haunted house that doesn't have at least one closed door.) As we all know, the excitement comes from anticipating what might be behind that door, and it builds to a peak as the protagonist places a slightly trembling hand on the knob.

In the real world there are only so many things that can be behind a door. There is also a limit to how menacing they might turn out to be. (And a trusty .38 Special can reduce the menace considerably.) But in a spooky house, all bets are off. This unique fictional situation turns our imaginations loose to dash away from the real world and romp through unbounded fields of goblins and shimmery apparitions.

All of this, of course, does not depend upon anything's actually being behind that door. In the best examples of the sub-genre we never really see a ghost. Even when the author

does not offer us a rational explanation, we are left to believe, if we choose, that there never were any spooks in that old house. (After all, there's no such thing . . .)

When Mac and Sally ran up against that cult of Satanists, we didn't expect to see anyone conjure up a real demon. As one of the suspects reminded us, we all know it's just trickery and sleight of hand. And at Baskerville Hall, we suspected all along that the apparition on the moor would turn out to be something perfectly natural. But we still enjoyed the thrill of the chase.

As with all fiction, there's a voluntary suspension of disbelief at work here. That's the price of admission to the show. We pay our money and we walk into a darkened theater, knowing that in a few hours we will walk out again into the cold light of day, but in the meantime . . .

As long as we're paying, we might as well go a few cents more and get a better seat. Why settle for an ordinary villain when we can have the extra jolies of a creaking door with who-knows-*what* behind it? We love that sort of thing. And when we leave the theater, it doesn't bother us that the eerie menace turned out to be nothing more than the shadows that

lurk around in the back of our minds.

This is why Lieutenant Chan can walk into that creepy mansion without destroying the credibility of the series. Or why Holmes and Watson can roll into that little Canadian village and survive to take on a "normal" case next time.

We can be scared by a ghost without committing ourselves to believing it really exists. After all, when we pick up a mystery story, what we're really after is the game. We want to be given bits and pieces of the puzzle, to be able to deduce our way to the end. It's the process, not the conclusion, that gives us our reward.

Which brings us to our third and last clue. Even the most logical and sensible of us gets a perverse sense of pleasure from entertaining the notion that there just might not be a rational solution to the problem at hand. This simple exercise gives our intellects a twofold stimulation.

First, in addition to any other risks in the case, there is another danger—the possibility that the world isn't working the way it's supposed to. In the context of a crime story, this constitutes a dual disruption of the usual order that exists in our lives. (Oops, there goes another

dose of escapism.)

Any crime disrupts the (law and) order of our society. Added to this, a tear in the fabric of reality gives our minds a much more serious puzzle to grapple with.

Thus we receive an extra benefit from our excursion into the mystery. We get to confront two problems at once, and we have the extra excitement of seeing two things going haywire simultaneously. We and the protagonist must sift our way through two sets of clues to solve not only the crime but also the question of what went wrong with our sense of reality.

Second, after a bout with the occult, we derive even more pleasure from discovering the *real* solution. An otherwise routine solution is much more exciting if we have to flirt with the supernatural before we get to it. ("Thank heavens it wasn't a ghost after all!") A touch of the irrational adds tension while the story builds to a climax. It gives us a sense of wonder that simply can't be achieved in a completely realistic story.

As a change of pace, that sense of wonder can be very refreshing. We open a door to the supernatural then quickly close it with a rational conclusion, but our short brush with some-

thing really frightening makes a definite and telling impression. This is the insight Hitchcock used so successfully. He understood that what we find most terrifying, what we have no built-in defense against, is that excruciating moment when the natural order of things has somehow gone wrong and we are no longer in control.

At the end of the story, after we have been reassured that the world really hasn't gone awry, we can emerge into the light of day, secure in the knowledge that our routine existence is waiting for us. Meanwhile, we have enjoyed the exquisite, albeit vicarious, thrill of surviving an encounter with the forces of evil.

So we seem to have solved the mystery of all those haunted houses. They don't really destroy the logic of a good mystery story. Instead, they add spice to the usual fare of whodunits by enhancing the elements that are already there. And that's well worth the price of admission.

Besides, we all love a good ghost story... even those of you who don't believe in ghosts.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Photo by Philip Lovesey

My introduction to Sergeant Cribb and his hirsute sidekick, Constable Thackeray, was made last season, via PBS's *Mystery!* series. As a consequence, I eagerly consumed the eight books on which the series was based, delighted by the novels' greater attention to the characters so engagingly (and accurately!) portrayed on my home screen by British actors Alan Dobie and Albert Welling.

Yet the detective team is just one of the elements to be savored in these "historical" mystery novels—perhaps not the strongest one, at that. The author himself has described Cribb as "shrewd rather than in-

spired, a detective who works with the limited resources of Scotland Yard in the 1880's and is hindered almost as much by his superiors as by the malefactors he pursues." Some readers may find Cribb a bit aloof, and Thackeray a shade too pedestrian.

All readers must, however, agree that Cribb and Thackeray are perfectly suited to these "Victorian police procedurals," as Lovesey describes them. It is an admirably precise description, albeit a modest one: these plots are far superior to standard, slice-of-life, precinct-house mysteries. They are ingenious, clever, with unpredictable, and sometimes shocking, endings.

Furthermore, the plots are always particularly suited to Lovesey's impeccably Victorian scenes. The first novel (published in England in 1970) has as its background a sporting event very popular in 1898: a 6-Day "Wobble," or walking contest, in a big London indoor arena. Murder strikes down one of the contestants, all of whom are doggedly marching the track to win a big pot of prize money, and Cribb has only the duration of the race to learn the identity of the perpetrator. The solution involves more than greed, and before Cribb closes the case, the reader has been exposed to some fascinating facets of Victorian mores.

That's true of each and every one of the novels. Lovesey depicts a different scene in each book. *The Detective Wore Silk Drawers* uncovers the illegal, bloody sport of "bare-fist pugilism," while *Abracadaver* (one of my favorites) takes us behind the wings, literally, of London's music hall circuit. *The Mad Hatter's Holiday* is a jaunt to the sunny Brighton beach scene—sunny until a grisly murder shadows a family's vacation. *Invitation to a Dynamite Party* deals with Irish nationalists, while *A Case of Spirits* takes us into middle-class parlors where seances are all the rage. *Swing, Swing Together*

floats readers down the Thames to Oxford; it becomes apparent that the murderer is following the route written up in the season's bestseller. *Waxwork*, perhaps the most brilliant of all the novels, opens with the confession of a beautiful young woman and her subsequent incarceration on death row. The power of the tabloids—as well as a peek into the home life of England's new young executioner—are compelling threads in this book.

The murder plots are so much a part of the Victorian scene that one couldn't possibly "lift them" and plunk them down in another mystery series. Beneath the obvious setting of each book is the backstage life of England in the late nineteenth century. There's the ironclad class system, so frustratingly crucial to Cribb's relationship to his ineffectual superior, Inspector Jowett, at the Yard. There's the Victorian view of women: the innocent, who is easily led astray (as everyone expects the spunky Harriet to be in *Swing*); or the "low" temptress, whose beauty unwittingly drives honorable men to murder (*Wobble to Death*); or the cool, composed, middle-class wife, a naive innocent driven to murder rather than soil her fine husband's good name (*Waxwork*). Love-

sey's characters are firmly rooted in their time, and it is his characters who are committing the crimes. Small wonder then that the motives are different from those in contemporary mysteries. Sexual repression, the fear of even a breath of scandal, the wide variety of fates—worse than death—add these authentic psychological insights to solid mystery plots laced with genuine historical detail, and you have an out-

standing mystery series. And I think you'll like Cribb and friend, too, and the humorous by-play that results when poor old Thackeray becomes (as he often does) the target of Cribb's very dry wit.

(Dodd, Mead published all but the last title; Pantheon published *Waxwork* in hardcover in the U.S. They are all available in Penguin paperback editions.)

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* was a bestseller in Italy, France, and Germany. Now Harcourt Brace Jovanovich has published it here in a large, handsome edition, with a gorgeous jacket and illustrated endpapers (\$15.95, 502 pp.), and its success in Europe is readily understandable. This mystery takes place during seven consecutive days inside an Italian abbey; the year is 1327. In addition to presenting us with a very appealing detective in the character of Brother William of Baskerville, and seven intriguing deaths, *The Name of the Rose* is full of period detail. Eco weaves his mystery plot through a richly patterned tapestry of the times: church and state politics, the wars with heretics, the daily life of members of a monastic order, and an insider's introduction to a typically well-stocked library of the day. (Through the library's books, and the discussions about the manuscripts, we get a fascinating peek into the minds of fourteenth century Western men, and a startling illustration of how the philosophers and poets and theologians of the time contributed to its social and moral beliefs.) Like the illuminated manuscripts so treasured in that century, Eco's novel is painstakingly rendered, carefully planned, and intricately embellished. Strong characters and an ingenious plot should make it appealing to any mystery lover; and if you especially appreciate novels written with attention to milieu, you'll love every page of this big book.

Very much in the "zany academic" tradition of Edmund Crispin

is Robert Robinson's **Landscape with Dead Dons**. The wry Inspector Autumn of Scotland Yard is sent to Oxford to investigate the vandalism of a rare book, and to prevent the same mischief from being perpetrated on a recently discovered and previously unknown Chaucer manuscript. Thus Autumn is on the scene, dining in the Senior Common Room in tiny Warlock College, when the hapless master, Manchip, is discovered among a frieze of life-sized statues on the rooftop. Alas, Manchip is quite as cold as the marble men with whom he silently communes. Before the culprit is exposed, Autumn unearths a rivalry among the dons for the prized post of the Rockinge Chair, along with a very un-platonic liaison, a stockpile of secreted pornographic books, and myriad other diversions. The eccentric academics, the amusing literary chitchat, and a wildly funny chase scene all earn Robinson the title of rightful heir to Crispin. (Penguin Books, \$2.95, 208 pp.)

Murder at the Academy Awards is a neat little puzzler written by someone familiar with the Hollywood scene. Author Joe Hyams has devised a diabolical murder that takes place during the awards ceremony, in front of thousands of audience viewers and millions at home before their TV sets. The coroner finally explains the *how* to homicide Captain Punch Roberts, but the cop is still left with the *who* to discover—no mean task, considering the number of aggrieved colleagues and ex-friends in the murdered female producer's circle. Some may find the novel's conclusion a bit melodramatic, but what could be more appropriate to a mystery set in moviedom? And this reader has absolutely no complaints about the characters, the background, and the uncanny device used to murder Eva Johnson at the height of the Academy Awards presentations. (St. Martin's Press, \$11.95, 182 pp.)

Patricia Moyes, who was profiled in this column last December, has written another excellent Henry and Emmy Tibbett mystery. **A Six-Letter Word for Death** opens when a complex crossword puzzle is sent anonymously to the chief superintendent at Scotland Yard. The apparent solution leads Tibbett to the Isle of Wight, where he and Emmy have been invited to an annual literary weekend of the Guess Who. (The Guess Who are all celebrated mystery writers who publish pseudonymously.) There's more to the puzzle, though, than meets the eye—just as there's more to the riding accident that happens over the weekend, killing a young houseguest. If you haven't done so to date, sample Moyes in this latest mystery (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, \$13.50, 241 pp.) or pick up

one of three earlier books recently reprinted as Owl Mysteries at \$3.95 each. *Season of Snows and Sins*, *Murder à la Mode*, and *Death and the Dutch Uncle* join several other Moyes titles on the Owl list.

Virginia Rich's first mystery (*The Cooking School Murders*) was a treat, and her second is no less mouthwatering. **The Baked Bean Supper Murders** brings back the engaging Mrs. Eugenia Potter, a widow of independent means—and mind. The locale this time is a small Maine fishing village where Genia spends six months each year in her cosy cottage. The sleepy seacoast town is an unlikely spot for murder, but it's all too used to tragedies at sea. Thus no one initially questions the unexpected explosion of a seagoing yacht that kills two of Genia's closest friends. But when the local teenagers begin harassing her, and then when her beloved dog is electrocuted, Genia again turns her talents to crimesolving. The Down East ambience is credibly drawn, Genia Potter is a refreshingly different and sympathetic heroine, and the scrumptious local recipes consumed and discussed throughout the tale are conveniently printed on the book's endpapers. This is haute cuisine for mystery buffs, light but satisfying. (E.P. Dutton, \$12.95, 267 pp.)

British author Roy Lewis also creates an unusual hero in **A Gathering of Ghosts**. Arnold Landon is a bachelor, a loner whose single passion is an appreciation of wood and woodworking techniques. He's content as a city planning official in Northumberland: his job allows him to work alone, to escape—frequently—the confinement of an office, and to explore the old buildings and the countryside he loves so dearly. Much to the chagrin of many, Arnold makes a momentous historical discovery in an old barn on land marked for development. And much to everyone's amazement, he argues eloquently for the barn's preservation. The controversy results in murder—and a surprising revelation of a very old crime, one that resulted from another kind of passion altogether. More a study in character than a conventional whodunit, *A Gathering of Ghosts* is quiet, but powerfully offbeat. (St. Martin's Press, \$10.95, 184 pp.)

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FICTION

Only One Way to Land by John Lutz

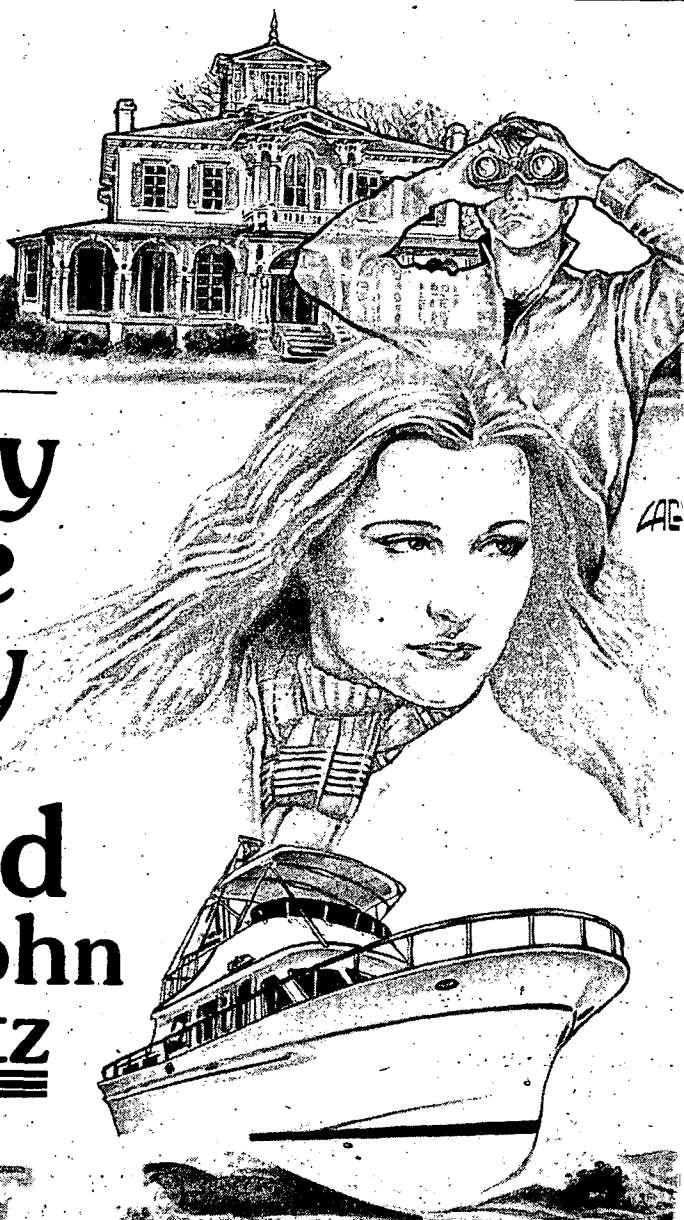


Illustration by Ray Lago

July in Del Moray, Florida, south of Fort Myers and east of the Ten Thousand Islands. Hot, steamy, about to storm.

Nudger sat at one of the Del Moray Yacht Club's white metal outside tables, across from Candy Caruthers. In front of each of them was a tall, wet, and greenish creation known as the Tidal Wave, the club's official drink. It was creme de menthe that gave the drink its greenish cast, and that wasn't to Nudger's taste. He took a few polite sips of the artless concoction, then ignored it.

A sea breeze was gusting in hard off the Gulf, pushing low black clouds laden with afternoon rain. The tall palm trees along the beach bent gracefully landward and rhythmically tossed their crowns of lush green fronds, as if dancing to some secret, mad music in the wind.

Candy Caruthers was privy to the music, too. She peeked with a glittering blue eye from between the long strands of honey blonde hair that had blown across her face. "I love the wind," she told Nudger.

"It freshens things."

Candy laughed loudly. "There's no doubt that things around here need freshening." Still smiling, she took a sip of her Tidal Wave. "I don't mean here specifically." She waved a lissome bare arm to encompass

the plush yacht club. "I mean it would be oh so nice if the wind could blow away the troubles of the Caruthers family."

Nudger figured that would require a hurricane. Thanks to the voracious news media, the Caruthers family's troubles were no secret. Candy's father, Calvin "Cap" Caruthers, a silver-haired vigorous man in his mid-sixties, was being divorced from his twenty-six-year-old wife Melissa. They were a rich and well known couple; Cap Caruthers had been a war hero, and Melissa would have been a celebrity of sorts on the basis of appearance alone. She was a gaunt, dark-haired beauty who had been a fashion model before her marriage to Caruthers six years ago. Caruthers had noticed her on a glossy magazine cover, decided he wanted her, and turned that wish into reality. Now they were in the middle of a messy divorce in which each party was accusing the other of everything from snoring too loudly to sexual perversion. If anyone other than the principals knew how much of this was true, it would be Candy. She lived in the same house as her father and stepmother, and had in fact been dragged into the case as the alleged participant in some of the bad behavior.

"I assume," Nudger said, "that your father's divorce and all the

accompanying sensationalism is why you paid my way down here."

"No," Candy said. "The divorce only complicates matters. And it might disappoint you to know that ninety-nine percent of everything you've heard or read about the Caruthers family and drugs and sex is pure nonsense. It's all charges and countercharges dreamed up by Mom's and Daddy's lawyers."

"Mom?"

"Melissa—my stepmother. We're very close."

"According to the news media—"

"The hell with the news media. We're like sisters, actually. We're both the same age, twenty-six, and we both care about my father."

"Melissa still cares?"

"Yes." She was emphatic. "Oh, Mom wants the divorce, but in her own way she still *likes* Daddy, even if she doesn't love him. It's impossible not to like him."

"Then why do you need my services? And why not a local PI?"

"You were recommended to me by David Collins," Candy said.

"The man who owns most of New Orleans."

"David is an old friend of Daddy's, and we've met once or twice. I heard you got his daughter Ineida out of trouble.

So when I needed someone, I decided on you."

"That makes some sense."

Candy drilled him with an appraising smile. "Some, but not enough. All right, Mr. Nudger, the other reason is that I can't trust a local investigator. With the divorce still in the courts, anyone from Florida I hired might be influenced by Daddy or Mom. They each have a wide circle of acquaintances that could apply pressure if a Florida investigator's license were at stake."

Nudger gazed out at the rolling blue-green Gulf. It was causing the sleek, docked sailboats to bob in unison at their moorings. "Okay," he said, after a pause. "It's savvy of you to recruit your knight from beyond the border."

"What a romantic concept!" she said. She sounded as if she'd just discovered a jewel in a popcorn box.

Nudger shrugged. "The essential me." He knew better, but why puncture her illusions? "Tell me about the offending dragon."

Candy rotated her Tidal Wave on the table's smooth metal surface, staring at the distortion of the damp ring around the glass. "Someone is watching the house."

"That isn't surprising, considering the divorce."

"Perhaps not. But I happen

to know something the press, and Mom, don't know. Daddy is almost broke."

"Legal fees, no doubt. I'm a divorced man myself."

"He expects to get a great deal of money shortly; I overheard him talking about it during a phone conversation. That made me wonder how he's been getting his money for the last few years. It's come infrequently, but in huge amounts. He's no longer active in business, so what's the source of his income?"

"There are lots of possibilities," Nudger told her. "Loan payments, stock dividends?"

"No," Candy interrupted. "Lately he's been acting rather furtive. I'm afraid he's involved in something illegal. I'd like you to find out if he is, and if so what that something illegal is."

Nudger felt his nervous stomach give a warning kick. He got out his roll of antacid tablets, thumbed back the aluminum foil, and popped one of the chalky white discs into his mouth. "Why do you want to know this?" he asked.

"So I can protect him."

Nudger sighed, finished chewing, and swallowed. "Candy, I believe you do love your father, which is why I feel I should warn you that the divorce might be wrapped up in whatever he's doing. You might

find out something you'll wish you didn't know."

She shook her head firmly, and her plain but pleasant features fell, as if from long practice, into a cast of determination. "I don't live my life trying to avoid painful conclusions, Mr. Nudger. That's a trap that snares too many of the wealthy. It's a temptation to sidestep reality when you can afford to think whatever is most convenient."

"I have the temptation myself, but not the means." Nudger found himself liking Candy Caruthers and wanting to help her. Hers was a world that could easily twist soul and reason. Despite that, she seemed to possess wisdom uncommon to youth. A lot of pain had to go along with it.

"Will you do what I ask, Mr. Nudger?"

Nudger watched a large cabin cruiser drift lazily away from the dock, shifted his gaze to the beach cabanas, the private pool entrance, the restaurant with its designer-labeled diners and drinkers, and the white-coated waiters gliding discreetly and subserviently among them. "All right," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Nudger." She meant it. She clasped his hand and squeezed it. "What can I tell you that might help?"

"First," Nudger said, "I think we should discuss my fee."

Candy released his hand and grinned apologetically. "I'm sorry. I simply forgot."

"It's been uppermost in my mind."

A waiter drifted near and Candy motioned for two more Tidal Waves. Nudger said he'd prefer bourbon and water.

"Sorry again," Candy said.

Nudger told her that was okay, they'd get along. A gull wheeled in close in an exquisite arc against the wind and screamed before sailing back toward the expanse of sand and sea. The scream sounded human. Female. Maybe it was a warning.

Later that afternoon, after a heavy but brief rain that left the streets damp and steaming in the lowering sun, Nudger took his rented subcompact car from the lot of his motel, the Blynken and Nod, and followed Candy's directions to the Caruthers estate.

The estate's grounds were spacious and well kept, and the house itself was like something off the cover of a Gothic novel. Steep wooden steps near the rear of the staunch Victorian home zigzagged their way down to a private beach and a boat-house and dock. A shaky looking, weathered wood pier jutted like an accusing finger out to sea, into water deep enough to

accommodate the small streamlined yacht that was anchored there. Nudger studied the sleek yacht through his binoculars. He admired its lines, but he saw no sign of life on board.

He spent about half an hour looking over the grounds. After determining the safest spots from which he could observe the house from concealment, he decided to drive to a seafood restaurant he'd noticed down the highway and get some supper, then return to the motel for a nap. He would come back to the Caruthers estate after dark. Candy had told him that whoever was watching the place was nocturnal.

The seafood soup Nudger spooned down at the restaurant was authentic enough to taste polluted. It was followed by a fried something that probably Jacques Cousteau hadn't catalogued. Back in his room at the Blynken and Nod, instead of sleeping, Nudger lay on the rumpled bed watching television and chomping antacid tablets. The violence on the small screen was appalling. By the time his stomach calmed down, it was dark outside.

This wasn't his kind of case, Nudger told himself as he drove the bone-rattling subcompact back up the coast highway. He shivered as he passed the seafood restaurant. What exactly was his kind of case he wasn't

sure. Maybe no kind. He didn't doubt for a moment that he was in the wrong business, but this was all for which life had prepared him. He wished he were a sponge fisherman, so he could look in the newspaper help wanted ads, get a sane job on the bottom of the sea, and forget this sneaking around nonsense.

But Nudger wasn't the only one sneaking around that evening, and that made the night's work easier.

He hadn't spent more than an hour on the hill overlooking the Caruthers house when he spotted another car parked farther down the winding road, at one of the vantage points he'd noted earlier. The car, a dusty gray sedan, was pulled well off the road and would be practically invisible in the foliage from almost any spot other than Nudger's. He reached for the ignition key, then thought better of it. There was plenty of time; whoever had gone to the trouble of concealing the car was settled in for a long stake-out.

Nudger struggled out of the subcompact and walked along the road toward the other watcher. When he thought he might be visible, he entered the shadows of the scrubby growth alongside the road and, estimating where the gray sedan was parked, cut cross-country toward it. Though he was sev-

eral hundred yards from the sea, the ground was soft and sandy and clung to his soles, making him strain as if he were trudging through glue. He was short of breath and had a stitch in his side by the time he got near enough to see the parked car.

He had emerged from the underbrush closer to it than he'd anticipated. Less than a hundred feet in front of him, moonlight glistened off a chrome bumper. Nudger put an antacid tablet in his mouth and crouched, watching, knowing that if the man seated behind the car's steering wheel happened to glance at the rear view mirror he might realize Nudger was there. Nudger chose not to think about what action that might prompt.

On the big sedan's rear bumper he saw a rental company's decal. The driver's features were indistinguishable in the darkness. Nudger made a mental note of the license number and retreated as silently as possible into the shadows, feeling a warm fondness for the night.

When he'd returned to his own car, Nudger settled into a cramped position behind the miniature steering wheel and waited for his breathing to even out. He turned on the car's radio; tuned in a Fort Myers station, and tried to relax.

As he sat there with the win-

dow rolled down, he heard a door slam several hundred yards away, from the direction of the Caruthers house. Nudger scanned the place with his binoculars but caught no sign of movement either outside the house or at the lighted windows.

Then he saw a tall, dark-clad form descending the wooden steps to the beach. When he focused the binoculars, Nudger could tell that the figure was that of a man wearing a windbreaker and a yachting cap. Despite darkness and distance, he could see the man's thick silver-white hair sprouting out from beneath the pushed-back cap.

The tall figure strode confidently out along the rickety pier, then across a narrow gangplank onto the craft that was docked there. Cap Caruthers boarding his yacht. Yellowish light appeared in two of the portholes, but there was no indication that the yacht, which Nudger estimated must require at least a small crew, might get underway.

At midnight a low red sports-car snarled into the Carutherses' circular driveway, veered left, and disappeared into a garage whose door had automatically opened. Nudger figured that would be Candy Caruthers returning from wherever Del Moray rich girls whiled away

their evenings.

Within another hour Cap Caruthers left his yacht and returned to the house. The lights in the house winked out window by window. Nudger turned his binoculars and his attention to the car parked on the road below.

At two A.M. the man in the gray car evidently assumed that the night's activities at the Caruthers estate had ended. The sound of the car's motor turning over rose to Nudger, mingled with the whisper of the moon-shot surf breaking on the beach beyond the house. The gray sedan nosed slowly out of its place of concealment like a wary animal, turned right, away from Nudger, growled, and picked up speed. Nudger started the subcompact, almost lost a filling as the little car jarred back onto the road, and followed.

Was this the man Candy had seen watching the house? She had glimpsed only a shadowed figure a few times, seen a light-colored car parked up the beach from the boathouse.

The gray sedan traveled all the way into Del Moray and parked in a slot in the lot of the Del Moray Hotel, a rambling, triple-decked, white stucco building near the center of town. Nudger parked nearby and watched a short, paunchy man with slicked-back dark hair get out of the car. With Napoleonic

vigor and purpose he strode toward the hotel's main entrance.

Quickly Nudger unfolded himself from the subcompact. He entered the lobby just in time to hear the paunchy dynamo ask for his room key.

"Two fifty-one," he demanded of the desk clerk, a narrow-faced, elderly man who obeyed with absentminded servility and then returned to reading a true crime magazine.

"Restaurant still open?" the paunchy man asked, hefting the room key in a stubby hand.

The desk clerk nodded his narrow gray head. "Open all night." He flipped a page, a glossy illustration of a desperate looking youth strangling a model who looked as if she belonged in a lingerie ad.

The paunchy man spun like a dancer on his heel and went through the archway into the coffee shop. Nudger waited until someone else came into the lobby, then casually wandered over to the stairs, rounded a corner, and jogged up to the second floor.

It took him less than a minute to locate the door numbered 251, less than another minute to use his honed Visa card to slip the simple hotel lock and enter the room.

The paunchy guy was a slob. Clothes were draped all over the place; there were cigar ashes on the rumpled bed and on the

carpet near the phone. An open black vinyl attache case sat next to a cheap portable typewriter on the desk. In the attache case were some sheets of lined notepaper with dates and times scrawled on them. There were also two large yellow envelopes, both addressed to a party in Gainesville, Georgia. One envelope was empty, the other contained something but was sealed.

Nudger took the sealed envelope into the bathroom, ran the basin full of hot water, covered it by draping a towel over it, and inserted the top of the sealed envelope so that the flap was inches above the steaming water.

Within a few minutes the glue had loosened its grip on the flap. Nudger withdrew the envelope and opened it. The typed pages inside contained the same dates and times that appeared on the notepaper, but they were identified as a record of Cap Caruthers' comings and goings for the past several days. There was also a request for more expense money for the envelope's sender, a paunchy private investigator named Raoul DeMent.

While the glue was still moist, Nudger resealed the envelope and returned things to the way they had been in the bathroom. He got out his own notepad and pen and copied the name and

Gainesville address from the envelope. Then he placed the envelope back in the attache case and left the room. His stomach said, "About time!" He had learned to interpret its growls.

Downstairs, as he was leaving the hotel lobby, Nudger glanced into the coffee shop and saw Raoul DeMent ravishing a hamburger.

"The man watching the Caruthers estate is a private investigator observing your father," Nudger told Candy Caruthers the next morning over breakfast in a Waffle King in Del Moray. The place was built to resemble a huge crown, though you'd never know it from inside. "But he isn't working for your stepmother."

Candy paused with her fork halfway to her open mouth, suddenly having lost interest in a large syrupy bite of her Royal Court Strawberry Special. Her blue eyes were puzzled. "Then who hired him?"

"A man named Yasuhiro Oh, a Japanese who owns a large electronics firm in Georgia. Oh is receiving regular reports on your father's activities and the times he's away from home."

"Maybe this Oh is a friend of Mom's."

"Not so's you'd notice. I checked on him. He's a businessman in his mid-sixties. His firm, El-Tron Electronics, man-

ufactures components for a range of products from automatic pilots to pour-through coffee brewers. If there's any relationship between Oh and your stepmother, no one knows about it but them. Possible but not likely."

Candy resumed the transfer of the bite of waffle from plate to palate and seemed to be mulling over this new information as she chewed. When she had swallowed noisily she said, "Find out more, Mr. Nudger."

"About Oh?"

"About everything."

"The task looms larger."

"So does the fee."

"In that case I'll have another Hamlet Sour Cream Danish Delight." He signaled a melancholy waitress and reached into his jacket pocket to fondle the roll of antacid tablets he knew he would need within the hour.

It seemed to Nudger that the most logical way to find out more about Oh's reason for hiring DeMent was to continue observing DeMent. That evening he sat parked in the subcompact in front of the Del Moray Hotel, and when he saw DeMent's gray sedan leave the lot and turn in the direction of the Caruthers estate, Nudger followed.

DeMent parked the sedan

where Nudger had first seen it the night before. Nudger drove past without slacking speed, rounded a bend, and then made a U-turn. He drove back the way he'd come until he reached the concealed area where he'd parked before. He situated his car in exactly the same spot. From it, without craning his neck, he could see both the Caruthers estate and DeMent's car. He wondered if anyone was watching the place regularly during daylight hours. Some of Caruthers' daytime arrivals and departures were noted in DeMent's report, but he seemed to be working alone, which suggested that Oh was interested primarily in what Cap Caruthers did at night.

A swishing sound, as of something rushing through the weeds behind him, made Nudger turn. A roar, a squeal, and as a dark shape swept toward him Nudger recognized it as a car with its lights out. No sooner had he realized this than the subcompact lurched forward to the loud crunch of metal on metal and Nudger's body slammed back against the seat. Whoever was driving the lights-out car apparently had parked here before and hadn't suspected another car might be occupying the spot. Which meant . . .

That this was one of those rare times when Nudger wished he carried a gun.

A large man wearing a dark suit got out of the car and walked toward Nudger's smashed rear fender. In the rear view mirror Nudger saw that the man had his right hand in his suit coat pocket. For an instant he contemplated ducking out the door on the passenger's side and running for the dark woods, but if the man had a gun and intended to use it there was no reasonable escape route. He got out of the car slowly.

The large man stopped a few feet from Nudger and looked him over. He was neatly dressed, not only bulky but lean-waisted and athletic, a boxer's build. His face was squarish and all-American-handsome beneath tousled dark hair. The shirt was white, the tie straight and tightly knotted. A daughter's ideal date.

"Who are you and why are you here?" the man asked.

Nudger's jittery stomach growled so loudly that the man glanced at it. "Maybe you should answer those same questions," he suggested, not quite managing to make his voice as authoritative as that of the figure confronting him.

"What right have you to ask?" the man said calmly.

"Squatter's rights, I suppose. I was here first." Nudger was feeling braver. After all, the man didn't *know* he wasn't

armed. "By what authority do you ask *me* questions?"

"FBI."

"Oh."

The man identified himself as Agent Frank Slayton, flashing a classy two-tone badge of the sort Nudger had seen before. Nudger knew it was genuine. This was a genuine FBI agent. This was genuine trouble.

Nudger showed his own identification, which at the moment seemed to carry as much clout as Monopoly money.

"A private investigator from out of state, eh?" Slayton said with something like disdain, as if what had promised to interest him had turned out to be hardly worth his time. "Who's your client?"

"The Caruthers woman," Nudger said. Not precisely a lie.

"The wife?" Slayton handed back Nudger's wallet and identification. "Divorce doesn't interest us," Slayton said. "We've been trying to stay out of the way of your colleague down there for the past two weeks." He motioned in the direction of DeMent's parked car.

"Colleague?"

Slayton shrugged. "Maybe he's working for the husband. A PI named DeMent."

"I don't know him," Nudger said.

"We don't, either; but we know

he's a PI and that's all we want to know. And he doesn't know about us, and we don't want him to know. If you were to tell him it wouldn't go easy for you. Do you understand?"

"Obstruction of justice?"

"Something like that. You wouldn't have known we were around, either, only . . ." Slayton waved a hand toward the crumpled fenders. "The point is, Nudger, we're involved in our own investigation. It has nothing to do with this divorce, and we don't want any interference."

"You'll get none from me," Nudger said. "This encounter is something I won't reveal to my client."

"I'll trust you," Slayton said, "since I have to." He pointed to the damaged subcompact. "A rental? Did you pay extra for the collision insurance?"

"No. I wasn't on an expense account when I leased it."

"Your government will pay for repairs," Slayton told him. "Keep a copy of the damage estimate." He turned back toward his car.

"I was just leaving," Nudger said. "You take this spot."

"No, thanks."

"It's my patriotic duty."

Slayton didn't reply. Probably he had an FBI sense of humor. He got into his car, backed it out onto the road, and drove it away in the direction of

the Caruthers house.

Nudger was becoming a bit boggled by all of this. The FBI was watching the Caruthers estate, along with two private detectives whom they logically assumed to be working for the contestants in a nasty divorce. And maybe Cap and Melissa Caruthers had each hired detectives to watch for extramarital meanderings that could prove beneficial in court. The area around the Caruthers estate might be teeming with agents of one kind or another, unsuspectingly passing each other in the night.

Nudger laughed, almost uncontrollably. He leaned on the tiny fender of the subcompact and waited until his fit of mirth subsided. His stomach felt fine. Nothing was better for nervous indigestion than laughter from down deep.

He got back into the dented car, started it, and bounced back onto the road. He drove toward town. Let Raoul DeMent and the rest of them sit in the dark and peer through binoculars while they passed the time listening on their car radios to the inane patter of all-night disc jockeys. Nudger was going back to his room and going to bed.

In the morning he called Candy Caruthers, who said with dramatic emphasis that she was alone but that the phones in the

house might be bugged. He waited fifteen minutes while she drove to a public phone and called him back.

"You told me your father might be engaged in an illegal activity," Nudger said. "Do you have the slightest idea what it involves?"

"Not an inkling. Of course there are the rumors."

"Rumors?"

"About drug-running. But everyone in Southern Florida who owns a fast yacht is suspected at one time or another of smuggling narcotics. The Ten Thousand Islands and the Keys are havens for smugglers; it's impossible for the Coast Guard to stop the arrival of drugs by boat from Mexico and South America, even from Cuba."

"Is your father's yacht fast?"

"The *Sea Dreamer*? Very fast."

"Do you think he's involved in drugs?"

She waited a while before answering. This was one suspicion she didn't care to voice, as if making it audible would move it nearer to fact. "I don't know. That's one of the reasons I hired you. Do you have any firm information that Daddy is into something illegal? You sounded so sure."

"I'm not sure," Nudger told her.

"Have you discovered anything more about Oh?"

"Not yet," Nudger said. "But

I will." He told Candy Caruthers he would phone her tomorrow and hung up.

A cold shower shocked him awake completely while probably shortening his life several years. By then it was almost ten o'clock. Nudger went back to the Del Moray Hotel.

As he drove into the Del Moray's lot, he saw DeMent's parked car in a slot near the far end of the blacktopped surface. DeMent probably had been up most of last night and was still in bed.

He wasn't, at least, in the coffee shop. Nudger walked to a booth from which he could see into the lobby, sat down, and ordered coffee and a glazed doughnut. The coffee shop was pleasantly cool after the heat already building outside. Someone had left a morning newspaper in the booth. Nudger divided his attention among the doughnut and the lobby and reading about the latest sensational developments in the Caruthers divorce hearings. Melissa allegedly had been having an affair with a teen-aged delivery boy; on the other hand it was alleged that Cap Caruthers had discussed the possibility of selling Melissa into bondage to South American slave traders. On such matters hinged the million dollar fortunes of divorce settlement. Nudger thought about his own

divorce from Elaine six years ago. She had fought like fury for the color television.

As Nudger was sipping his third cup of coffee, Raoul DeMent, looking tired and rumpled, waddled into the coffee shop and sat down at a table near the door. He was occupied with the waitress when Nudger paid for the coffee and doughnut and left.

Within five minutes Nudger was again in DeMent's disheveled room. He had hung out the "Do Not Disturb" sign and figured he would have at least fifteen uninterrupted minutes while DeMent ate breakfast.

The fifteen minutes yielded no new information other than that DeMent was a devotee of paperback detective novels. Nudger glanced around the room that he had carefully put back together in its original disorder. He knew he had been there long enough, maybe too long. What if he ran into DeMent in the hall as he left? His stomach said, "Get out!"

It aggravated Nudger that he'd wasted his time there. Before leaving, he tore out the last few pages of the paperback mystery novel DeMent had just begun reading. That way it would be more like real life.

But DeMent hadn't planned on returning to his room after breakfast. When Nudger stepped from the elevator into

the lobby, he caught a glimpse of the detective shrugging into his suit coat as he pushed through the glass double doors to the parking lot.

DeMent turned his car in the opposite direction from that of the Caruthers estate. He drove for a few blocks, then veered onto an exit ramp and got on the highway leading east, away from the coast. He drove fast. Nudger had to push his whiny little rental car hard to keep DeMent's gray sedan in sight.

Ahead of Nudger a small, propeller driven plane crossed above the highway low and at a downward angle. It disappeared beyond a slight rise. When Nudger looked back at the road, he saw DeMent's sedan turning off the highway onto a road that a sign proclaimed led to the Del Moray airport.

A jet airliner wouldn't have dared to set down at this airport. Nudger parked well away from DeMent on a gravel lot and looked out at a single asphalt runway. To his left was a small brick office and terminal building, on top of which a red wind sock listlessly pointed northeast in the humid hot air. Several light planes were parked toward the far end of the runway. Beyond them squatted three corrugated metal hangars. The plane Nudger had seen land taxied off the runway,

gave a hard left rudder, and rolled toward the hangars. Its propeller stopped spinning, and two men emerged from the shadowed hangar entrance to help the pilot roll the plane toward the gaping doors. A red and yellow twin-engined plane took to the air with a roar and went into a climbing turn toward the ocean. DeMent got out of his car and walked over to stand near the terminal building in a waiting attitude.

A single-engine, high-winged silver plane with a red stripe along its fuselage circled the field, dropped lower, and made a smooth landing. On its tail was painted a red circle containing the letter "E" traversed by a lightning streak—El-Tron Electronics' logo. The plane taxied to the hangar entrance and was also pushed inside. A short while later a yellow golf cart emerged from the hangar. There were two men on the cart. One of them was wearing a blue business suit and was the pilot of the silver plane; the other was the driver. DeMent tossed away the cigar he'd been smoking and stepped forward to meet the cart. He and the man in the business suit went into the terminal building while the cart's driver swung the vehicle around and headed back toward the hangars. The man in the blue suit carried a small suitcase, walked with a limp,

and had Oriental features.

When they emerged from the building, DeMent was dutifully carrying the suitcase. The two men walked to DeMent's car and got in, and Nudger followed them back to the Del Moray Hotel.

Nudger waited outside for fifteen minutes and then walked in and asked the desk clerk if Mr. Yasuhiro Oh had checked in yet. The clerk told him that Mr. Oh had gone up to Room 358 just a minute ago.

For the benefit of the clerk, Nudger crossed the lobby and pretended to talk for a while on one of the house phones. Then he left and returned to his own meager digs at the Blynken and Nod. He really did use his room phone. He placed a long distance call to Lieutenant Jack Hammersmith, who turned out to be sitting unsuspectingly in the 3rd Precinct office over a thousand miles north of Del Moray. Hammersmith had been Nudger's partner in a patrol car twenty years ago, during Nudger's brief police career. The bond between the two men had never been broken.

Nudger identified himself and told Hammersmith he was in Florida. "It's plenty hot here," he said.

"The call isn't collect," Hammersmith told him. "We can chat about the weather as long as you want."

"Why I called," Nudger said, forgetting about the weather, "is to ask you to get some information from the Gainesville, Georgia, police department. I need to learn about a man there named Yasuhiro Oh."

"'O' what? Is that a middle initial?"

"He's Japanese. Oh is his last name, like the home run hitter."

Silence. Apparently Hammersmith didn't follow Japanese baseball enough to know about the Oriental equivalent of Babe Ruth.

"There was a famous Japanese baseball player of the same name," Nudger said.

"Oh."

"That's right."

"Huh?"

"He owns a business in Gainesville, El-Tron Electronics."

"This is going to be a lot of trouble, Nudge. Is it important?"

"I wouldn't ask unless it meant the very survival of our world as we know it." Nudger heard the lip-smacking wheezing sound of Hammersmith firing up one of his horrendous cigars.

"Okay, Nudge." The voice was slightly distorted by the cigar. "When do you need this info?"

"As soon as it reaches your hot little hand." Nudger gave

Hammersmith the phone number of the Blynken and Nod and told him he appreciated the favor.

"You shoulda waited till winter to go to Florida, Nudge," Hammersmith said. "Now last January me and the wife drove down there and—"

"This isn't a collect call," Nudger reminded him. As he hung up he heard Hammersmith chuckling around the cigar.

The rest of that day and most of the next, Nudger followed Oh, who was driving around in a luxury rental car while DeMent was at his post keeping the Caruthers estate under close watch. Oh had supper in an expensive seafood restaurant while Nudger, outside in his parked car, wolfed down a chili dog. When Oh left the restaurant, he drove to the Del Moray waterfront, where he boarded a large sleek cabin cruiser docked there. He stayed on board for about an hour, talking to a shadowy figure that appeared now and then behind the drawn curtains of the lighted cabin. As the boat bobbed gently at dockside, Nudger made out the name *Dandy Dan* lettered across its stern.

Even the breeze off the sea did little to cool the humid evening air, and by the time Oh left the cabin cruiser Nudger was soaked in perspiration and

his hands were slippery on the steering wheel. He suspected that he'd done serious harm to the car's engine while trying to keep up with DeMent earlier that morning; heat was rolling up around his feet and something was softly hissing beneath the sloping little hood.

Fortunately he wouldn't have to drive the car harder to keep pace with Oh's larger, more powerful vehicle. Instead of getting into his car, Oh buttoned his suit coat and began walking along the narrow street bordering the glittering dark water. Nudger gratefully climbed out of the subcompact, relieved to find that all his limbs could still extend to their fullest, and followed Oh's erect but limping figure.

On Nudger's left, various souvenir shops and related tourist attractions were open along the street. On his right, an array of docked vessels bobbed in unison with the soft lapping of waves. Nudger heard the occasional muffled thump of a hull bumping a padded dock buffer. Music and sometimes laughter wafted from some of the pleasure boats showing lights. Except for the pressing heat, it was a nice night and a nice place for a walk.

Oh stopped walking, dabbed at his perspiring forehead with a white handkerchief, and dis-

appeared through a doorway.

Nudger moved nearer, crossed the street to get a better view, and saw that Oh had entered the offices of the Pegasus Steamship Line. Standing in the shadows near a docked sailboat with a mast tall enough to merge with the dark sky, Nudger idly chewed an antacid tablet and waited.

He didn't move when, twenty minutes later, Oh emerged from the Pegasus office and limped back the way he had come. When Oh had passed, Nudger followed him back to where the cars were parked near the *Dandy Dan*.

It was easy to figure out where Oh was driving after they left the dock. As soon as Nudger realized they were taking the route back to the hotel, he dropped back in the struggling subcompact and relaxed, turning the air conditioner on high and ignoring the engine's clattering protests.

Oh treated himself to a drink in the Del Moray Hotel's lounge—presumably a nightcap—then went upstairs to his room. Nudger waited almost an hour on a stool near the end of the bar, from which he could see the elevators, to make sure he was bedded down for the night. Oh was an elderly man with a bad leg, but there was an aura of energy about him that suggested he was tireless.

When Nudger returned to the Blynken and Nod, he checked at the desk to see if Hammersmith had phoned. Hammersmith hadn't. Candy Caruthers had, and left a number where she could be reached.

They met at a lounge overlooking the Gulf. It was ten miles outside of town. Apparently Candy had gotten into the spirit of subversiveness and didn't deem it wise for them to be seen together in her yacht-club-set haunts. They sat near a wide window affording a panoramic view of darkness broken only by a lonely, distant buoy light. And over whisky sours, and a yellowish glowing candle in a mottled glass holder, they talked.

"Daddy's taken a trip," Candy said. "The *Sea Dreamer* is gone."

"When did he leave?"

She shrugged and sipped her drink. The candle glow transformed her plain, attractive features into the serene kind of beauty seen in paintings by old masters. "I noticed that the yacht was missing from its moorings late this afternoon," she said. "I don't know how long it had been gone, and Daddy never tells anyone where he's going. Every few months he simply boards the *Sea Dreamer* and disappears for several days."

"Maybe he's fishing."

"Daddy doesn't fish. What

have you learned about Yasuhiro Oh?"

"Not much, but I utilized some of my far-reaching contacts and expect to know a great deal more about him shortly. Also, he's here in Del Moray."

"Is he—?"

"He's not on the *Seá Dreamer*; I saw him go up to his hotel room at around ten o'clock." Nudger sampled his drink and gazed out at the vast blackness of the Gulf. It was disconcerting to imagine how far that black void extended. "Do you know anyone who owns a big cabin cruiser called the *Dandy Dan*?"

Candy screwed up her mouth and searched her memory. For a moment she looked twelve years old. "I don't think so."

"Yasuhiro Oh does. He spent some time on board this evening. Then he visited the offices of the Pegasus ship line."

"Pegasus does commercial shipping," Candy said, "all sorts of cargo to and from South America."

"What do you mean by 'all sorts'?"

"Copper, construction materials, bananas, whatever that kind of ship carries."

"It seems there are no detectives hired by your father or stepmother watching the principals in the divorce," Nudger said. "Maybe I'm cynical, but that strikes me as unusual."

"Not when you realize that

Mom and Daddy aren't bitter enemies. They simply want to live apart and unmarried. I told you it was the media that was concocting all those bizarre stories. And of course the divorce lawyers furnish plenty of innuendo."

"Was your father's war record also concocted by the media?"

Candy appeared insulted. She sat back and wore an injured expression, her features in shadowed sharp relief outside the circle of candlelight. "Of course not. He was the second-in-command of a destroyer, the U.S.S. *Latty*, when it was attacked by kamikazes—Japanese suicide planes whose mission was to dive into U.S. warships—in the South Pacific in 1945. The captain and several crew members were killed, and Daddy took command. He fought off the attackers and brought the ship home. He was decorated for what he did. He became a big hero." She sat forward and stared challengingly at Nudger. "A genuine hero."

"Relax, please," Nudger told her. "You're the only one I can talk to who knows the truth about these things." He saw that their glasses were empty. He looked again at Candy in the soft light and for a moment regretted that he had a rule about fraternizing with his

clients, and that she regarded him as a middle-aged creature of relative poverty who no doubt wore plain white underwear from J.C. Penney's. The woman had insight. It was time for them to leave and go their separate ways. "I'll phone you when I receive more information about Oh," he said; magnanimously reaching for his wallet.

Candy bent low to pick up her purse from beside her chair. "I'll get the check," she said. "Since you're on an expense account, I'd wind up paying for the drinks anyway."

Insight indeed.

Nudger was in bed at the Blynken and Nod when Hammersmith phoned.

With the cool receiver pressed to his ear, he rested his head on his perspiration-soaked, flattened pillow and listened as Hammersmith identified himself in a voice tinged with sadism.

"It's two in the morning," Nudger said groggily.

"I'd have phoned Greenwich if I wanted to check the time," Hammersmith told him. "You said you wanted information on Yasuhiro Oh as soon as possible."

Nudger snapped fully awake at the mention of Oh's name. He sat up and switched on the bedside lamp. "So what did you find out?"

"Oh is of Japanese descent, attended Northwestern University in the early fifties, founded El-Tron twenty years ago, and has been a successful businessman ever since. He was married but his wife died. El-Tron makes electronic components for a variety of products. Recently they lost a big government contract for missile parts, but the company is still financially solid if not prospering."

"Oh sounds like an upstanding citizen," Nudger said with undeniable disappointment.

"He has a police record, but it's been clear for the past ten years. If you go back that far you'll find that El-Tron was found guilty of fraud involving some kind of tariff violation. Two years before that, Oh himself was dragged into court and forced to pay fines on two parking violations." There was a pause, punctuated by bellows wheezing. One of Hammersmith's abominable cigars being lighted. "Is this useful information, Nudge?"

"No. It sounds like the record of a Chamber of Commerce president."

Hammersmith chuckled. "Oh's military record is more interesting but probably just as useless. He was a kamikaze pilot in the Japanese air force."

Nudger spent several seconds digesting that pithy morsel of information. "He must not have

been a very successful kamikaze pilot, since he's alive and walking around Florida."

"It seems he was captured," Hammersmith explained. "In 1945, as he was trying to crash his plane into a U.S. ship in the South Pacific, he was hit and went down in the water. He lost a leg in the crash, but he survived and was pulled from the ocean by the ship's crew."

Despite the heat of the motel room, a cold sensation snaked its way up the nape of Nudger's neck. "What was the name of the ship?"

"The *Latty*," Hammersmith said. "It was a destroyer."

"I know," Nudger muttered.

"How could you know that, Nudge?"

"It was Cap Caruthers' ship."

"Caruthers . . . You mean the husband in that messy Florida divorce circus?"

"The same. You've helped a lot, Jack. In fact, you might have explained everything."

"Nothing's been explained to me, Nudge. But I'll try to make something else clear to you. The Caruthers divorce is not only messy, it's dangerous for a small-time out-of-state investigator."

"Big money is operating there, and now and then big money needs someone like you to throw to someone like me, either dead or alive. Big money means big problems."

"And a big fee," Nudger pointed out.

"Hah! The fee is the bait, Nudge. Betcha there's a hook in it."

Nudger declined the bet. "Thanks for the information," he said.

"Sure," Hammersmith said. "Banzai, Nudge."

"What?"

"That's what kamikaze pilots yelled just before they disappeared into the clouds on their way to their deaths."

"Then maybe that's what you should yell before you light your cigars," Nudger suggested.

Hammersmith hung up.

Nudger replaced the receiver, switched off the lamp, and lay awake trying to fit his fragmentary thoughts into some meaningful pattern, trying to gain some insight into the mind and role of Yasuhiro Oh. For a kamikaze pilot there must have been the blackest shame in not only failing in one's mission but in also being captured alive by the enemy that was to have been destroyed. More importantly, the kamikaze incident provided a connective thread between Cap Caruthers and Oh. What that thread meant was something Nudger had yet to discover.

It was morning, and Nudger was showering, when it occurred to him that it might be

a mistake to assume that the Caruthers divorce, Cap Caruthers' alleged drug running, and Oh's interest in Cap Caruthers' movements might all somehow be connected. It could be that none had much if any bearing on the others; possibly Oh hadn't any idea what had become of Cap Caruthers until the divorce publicity, and that in itself had drawn him to Florida.

Then, as he stood beneath the beating needles of the shower watching water swirling at his feet, a disturbing, chilling possibility crept from a corner of Nudger's mind into his consciousness. His flesh began to tingle, and not from the pounding of the water.

He got out of the shower still partially lathered with soap, toweled dry, dressed quickly, and drove to the Del Moray Hotel. When he knocked on the door to Oh's room and got no answer, Nudger used his Visa card to slip the lock and enter. He was getting plenty of practice on the Del Moray Hotel's locks.

In contrast to DeMent's room, everything in Oh's room was neatly arranged. Though the bed was unmade, the covers were turned back symmetrically. Oh's clothes were hung in the closet. Underwear, socks, and shirts were folded in a dresser drawer. In the bathroom, shaving gear and cos-

metics were aligned with military precision on the shelf above the washbasin. But the cap wasn't on the toothpaste tube. The bottles of aftershave lotion and cologne also stood uncapped.

Nudger went to the phone and dialed DeMent's room number. When DeMent answered, Nudger said, "I'm a private investigator like yourself, Mr. DeMent. I've been watching you watch Cap Caruthers. We need to talk. I'm sitting on the bed in your employer's room."

Nudger had to admire DeMent. The paunchy little detective wasn't thrown for more than a few seconds. He said, "Sure. I'll be there soon as I can," and hung up.

A few minutes later, looking sleepy and disheveled, DeMent knocked twice on the door and then pushed into Oh's room.

Nudger introduced himself and the two men shook hands with appropriate wariness.

"Caruthers or his wife hire you?" DeMent asked. He had beady ferret eyes that glared out from padded cheeks. A shrewd and careful man, a walker on the edge. This was the small-time investigator that Hammersmith had mentioned, the non-swimmer in the deep end of the pool. Nudger wondered if his own features conveyed the same desperate,

calculating expression.

"It doesn't matter who hired me," he said. "What I need to know is, did you report to Oh that Caruthers put to sea night before last in his yacht?"

DeMent shrugged. "Why should I answer you?" He glanced around. "Where's Oh?"

"I know you've been reporting Caruthers' movements to your client," Nudger said, ignoring DeMent's question. "Was Oh waiting for Caruthers to leave in his yacht?"

DeMent seemed angry and uncomfortable, caught off guard and not liking it. "I think I better talk to Oh."

"He's gone," Nudger said. "I hope you collected your fee in advance."

DeMent ran out of patience. "Listen, you . . ." He lowered his head and took a step toward Nudger.

Nudger ignored him, turned, and walked toward the door.

"Hey! Where you going?" DeMent asked.

"To the Caruthers estate. Want to come along?"

DeMent stood weighing the odds, like a menacing, bewildered miniature bull frozen in puzzlement in the bull ring. He didn't want to go with Nudger, but the alternative was to be left standing and wondering in Oh's room.

"Okay," he said in disgust. "I'm coming with you." He said

it as if he were in charge.

"Good," Nudger said. "Let's take your car. It'll be faster, not to mention more comfortable."

When they reached the Caruthers estate, they found Candy Caruthers and a slender dark-haired woman having breakfast on the patio overlooking the Gulf. Nudger recognized the woman as Melissa Caruthers. She looked as if she could resume her modeling career tomorrow.

Candy glanced from Nudger to DeMent to Melissa. Back to Nudger. "Since Daddy was gone," she said, "I invited Mom here for—"

"Moral support." Melissa finished her stepdaughter's sentence. "Despite what the news media might say." She began to identify herself.

"I know who you are," Nudger interrupted. He introduced himself and DeMent, who stood in belligerent, watchful stupefaction.

"I assumed you were with the people in the house," Melissa said.

"What people?"

"The FBI," Candy said to Nudger. "They've been here since early this morning. They're waiting for Daddy to return."

"Is there any way to contact your father's yacht?" Nudger asked.

"That's what we're here to

prevent," Frank Slayton said, as he opened sliding glass doors and stepped out into the sunlight on the patio. A tall man with Latin features, as square-edged clean-cut as Slayton, followed him outside. "This is Agent Sam Ortero," Slayton said. "What's going on, Nudger?"

While the others watched intently, Nudger drew Slayton aside and told him everything.

"We're tracking Caruthers' yacht," Slayton said. "We're sure he picked up a narcotics shipment in Mexico, and we're waiting here to confiscate it and place him under arrest when he docks."

"If he docks," Nudger corrected. "Can we contact him by radio?"

"I can't allow that," Slayton said. "We can't be sure that what you think is true." The agent rubbed his handsome, squarish chin, looked glum. "On the other hand, if you are right, we won't have anyone to interrogate. We're trying to eliminate the regular importation of millions of dollars' worth of illegal drugs."

"Time could be running out," Nudger said. He slipped an antacid tablet into his mouth and chewed with metronome precision, glancing at the others still staring curiously at him and Slayton.

Beyond the patio a pelican swooped low over the sea,

seeking its prey. It dived. It missed.

Slayton came to a quick, firm decision in that FBI way of his. "I'm going to have a fast Coast Guard boat pick us up here," he said.

"Us?"

"We're all going," Slayton said. "I don't want anyone staying behind and possibly contacting Cap Caruthers by radio."

After Slayton had hurried back into the house to call the Coast Guard, DeMent swaggered with pugnacious pudginess over to Nudger, his dark eyes narrowed angrily. "You drag me up here and I get tangled up with the FBI and I still don't know what's going on," he growled. "I don't like it a bit."

"What will perk you up," Nudger told him, "is some fresh sea air."

The Coast Guard cutter was a forty foot craft with speed. Its gray bow was raised high and proud, and its hull slapped over the waves as it headed away from the Caruthers dock out into the blue Gulf. Nudger stood near Slayton by the rail, squinting against the sea spray that was cooling him in the hot glare of the sun off the shimmering water. The Coast Guard had a fix on the *Sea Dreamer's* position and was on course to reach the unsuspecting Cap Caruth-

ers in the shortest time possible.

They'd been out on the Gulf for about forty-five minutes when the captain on the bridge shouted down at Slayton and pointed off the port bow. Nudger stared in the direction the captain had pointed and could make out a tiny dark shape near the horizon. Slayton borrowed the captain's binoculars, aimed and focused them.

"It's the *Sea Dreamer*," he said.

Nudger felt on his face the subtle change of wind direction as the boat altered course. He almost stumbled on the deck as the bow lifted higher and they gained speed. The sound of the waves slapping against the hull was like irregular rifle fire. Candy, Melissa, and DeMent all rushed unsteadily to the side of the deck where Nudger and Slayton stood. They all craned their necks for a view of the *Sea Dreamer*.

Then Nudger glimpsed another dark speck—above the horizon. He snatched the binoculars from Slayton and pressed their rubber cups to his eyes. It took him a few seconds to locate the airborne speck. He prayed that it was a gull, but it hadn't moved like a gull against the sky.

When he focused the binoculars, he saw that the speck was the red and silver aircraft

that Oh had landed at the Del Moray airport. He cursed, pointed, and handed the binoculars back to Slayton, who focused on the plane and echoed Nudger's curse.

Within half a minute they could all see the plane quite clearly with the naked eye. They watched the sun glint off its silver wings and its red El-Tron emblem as it soared, dipped, and headed toward the *Sea Dreamer*. It was only a few feet above the waves, bearing down on the yacht in classic kamikaze fashion.

"I wouldn't have believed it," Slayton said almost reverently, "that the shame could last all those years . . ."

"You were never a kamikaze pilot," Nudger said. And then softly, "Banzai."

Cap Caruthers was running illegal cargo, all right. A figure appeared on the *Sea Dreamer's* aft deck and flung a tarpaulin off a brace of high-caliber machine guns, swiveled the twin barrels toward the oncoming plane, and opened fire. The chattering pop of the guns wafted over the water toward the Coast Guard cutter as it closed the distance between it and the *Sea Dreamer*.

Pieces flew from the small plane. It shuddered but didn't alter course in the face of the machine gun fire. A tall man — Cap Caruthers —

appeared on the *Sea Dreamer's* flying bridge and calmly studied the plane through binoculars. The bullets that missed the plane were raising geysers of water behind it as it droned inexorably toward its target. Nudger stood in breathless, silent fascination. He couldn't have turned away. This was like watching *Victory at Sea* in color.

The plane's left wing dipped and almost touched the water, and for an instant Nudger thought it would go down. But it righted itself, climbed sharply, then dived straight toward the *Sea Dreamer's* bridge.

There must have been explosives on the plane. Both it and the yacht disappeared in a huge ball of fire that rose like a brilliant sun gone mad into the blue sky. A few seconds later the roar of the explosion hurt Nudger's ears and left them buzzing. The shock wave rocked the Coast Guard boat.

The Gulf breeze soon cleared away black smoke to reveal only a broken tail section, a curve of shattered hull, and various smaller pieces of smoldering debris where the *Sea Dreamer* had floated. Cap Caruthers and his ship were below the waves; a forty-year-old fanatical mission of destruction had been completed.

Melissa was stunned, her face pale and old. One of the crew-

men helped her below deck. Candy was sobbing, gasping for breath. She burrowed her face into Nudger's chest, and he felt her body's shuddering merge with the vibration of the boat.

"There goes our source of information," Nudger heard Slayton murmur.

"There goes my fee," DeMent said, and spat over the side.

Nudger pulled Candy closer to him and pressed his hand over her free ear.

The Coast Guard cutter circled for a while, though everyone knew it was pointless to search for survivors. After radioing the exact position of the tragedy, the captain set a course for shore.

It was when they were within sight of Del Moray that Nudger noticed, among the many fishing vessels and pleasure boats, the *Dandy Dan* headed into shore and only a few hundred yards from the docks.

The *Dominique* was a twenty thousand ton freighter of the Pegasus Line. It was loaded with a cargo of heavy construction equipment bound for several South American ports and was due to cast off in an hour.

Nudger sat uncomfortably in a wooden chair in one of the *Dominique's* few passenger compartments, chewing antacid tablets and waiting. The

subtle, steady rocking of the ship at her berth was making him slightly nauseated.

But when the compartment door opened, Nudger forgot his discomfort and smiled at the man who entered.

"We need to talk," Nudger said, not getting up.

Shock crossed Oh's face like a passing shadow. Then he frowned slightly, glanced about, and entered the compartment all the way and closed the door. He had been carrying a large leather suitcase, which he placed carefully beside the bunk, as if the deliberate act would allow him time to think.

"Who are you?" he asked as he straightened and faced Nudger.

Nudger told him. Then he said, "You're a realist, Mr. Oh, a hard-nosed businessman who wouldn't hold a forty-year-old grudge about being prevented from committing suicide."

"'Grudge' is hardly an adequate term, Mr. Nudger."

"Whatever the term, you've proved by your actions since the war that you're not the suicidal type after all. You're also not the type to let the valuable cargo that Caruthers was carrying on the *Sea Dreamer* go to the bottom of the Gulf—unless of course you'd already been paid for that cargo."

Oh smiled confidently, barely twitching his lips. He had a

nifty poker face. "Please explain, Mr. Nudger."

"You and Cap Caruthers were in business together for a long time. You were his narcotics supplier. Then the divorce hearing came up and the news media started digging into Caruthers, and I'm sure you found out the FBI was onto him. You hired a detective to watch Caruthers so you could be sure he hadn't talked yet to the FBI, but exposure of your operation was almost inevitable. You decided to make one more big profit and get out in such a way that everyone would assume you were dead. So you sold Caruthers a final shipment—probably worthless—to smuggle in on the *Sea Dreamer*, pocketed the money, and when he was almost back to the Florida coast, where you could be sure there would be witnesses, you flew the El-Tron company aircraft into the *Sea Dreamer* and sent ship and plane to the bottom, just as you tried to do so many years ago. But this time you were more sensible. You flew your plane from the *Dandy Dan*, by remote control. Banzai. Mission accomplished. Now here you are alive and on your way to the good life in South America under an assumed name. No samurai you."

Oh still seemed unperturbed, as if he'd been listening only absently to Nudger. But he

said, "Very nicely thought out, Mr. Nudger."

"And true."

Oh smiled. "Standing here embarrassingly alive as I am, I can hardly deny it. The question is, what now?" He reached into an inside pocket of his suit coat and withdrew a small revolver. "Merely a bargaining chip," he explained, nodding toward the gun. "Don't be alarmed."

Nudger had never looked into a revolver barrel and not been alarmed. And he wasn't deceived by Oh's reassurances. Guns were for killing, and that was what Oh intended doing with this one.

The door from the adjoining compartment opened, and Slayton and Ortero walked through, also with guns drawn, trained on Oh. Nudger let out a relieved breath when the gun that was aimed at him lowered, but Oh's finger remained firm on the trigger.

For a moment Nudger thought that this elderly executive might actually decide to shoot it out. Oh's eyes were steady and unreadable. Violence had already begun in Nudger's stomach.

But the inclination for suicide had left Oh decades ago. He sensibly handed over the revolver to Slayton and presented no resistance as he was handcuffed and read his rights. He was a businessman cutting his losses, already anticipating long legal wars.

"I assume you were eavesdropping," Oh said to Slayton.

Nudger stood up on shaking legs and grinned. "No one had to eavesdrop," he said to Oh, as he removed a small flat instrument from his breast pocket. "Our conversation is accurately preserved in tone and content, all right here on tape in this small but efficient recorder. It's the best that El-Tron manufactures."

UNSOLVED

by
George J. Summers

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the November issue.

Bell and Cass were Alex Smith's sisters; Dean and Earl were Faye Jones's brothers. (Alex was a man and Faye was a woman.) Their occupations were as listed below:

Smith

✓ Alex—doctor -
✗ Bell—doctor - F
✗ Cass—lawyer - F

Jones

✗ Dean—doctor
✗ Earl—lawyer
✗ Faye—lawyer - F

One night while two of these people were in a bar, two were on a beach, and two were at a movie, one of the two people on the beach killed the other.

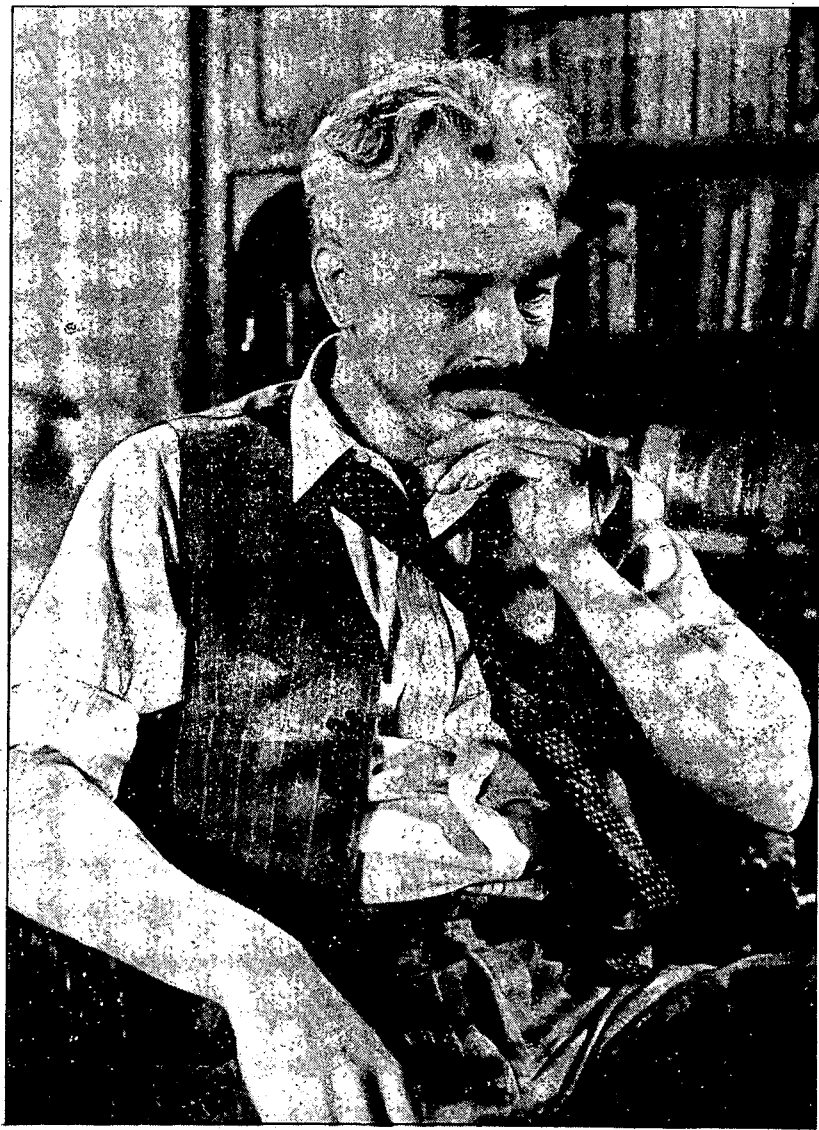
The following facts refer to the people mentioned above:

1. A doctor and a lawyer were in the bar.
2. The two people at the movie had the same occupation.
3. The victim and the killer were twins.
- 4a. The victim was married to one of the two persons in the bar.
- 4b. The killer was married to the other person in the bar.
5. The victim and the victim's spouse had different occupations.
- 6a. One of the two persons at the movie was the ex-spouse of one of the two persons in the bar.
- 6b. The other person at the movie and the doctor in the bar were former roommates (same sex).

Which one of the six was the killer?

See page 126 for the solution to the Mid-September puzzle.

** Taken from New Puzzles in Logical Deduction by George J. Summers.
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Frederic Forrest as Dashiell Hammett ponders fiction and reality.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



When he started out as a detective writer, Dashiell Hammett drew on his own experiences as a Pinkerton "operative" or investigator in the early 1920's. The novel, *Hammett*, by Joe Gores, is the basis for the new movie of the same name. Divorced and living alone in San Francisco in the late 1920's, Gores' Dashiell Hammett has become a writer of pulp detective thrillers. The fictional Hammett is called on by a fellow Pinkerton from the old days and asked to help out in just one more case. He agrees. Then, back at his old vocation, he finds himself viewing the adventure that follows in relation to his own writings—both those already completed and those in the planning stage.

The reader, too, recognizes much from such famous Ham-

mett novels as *The Dain Curse*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Glass Key*: names of streets, situations encountered, and character types met with.

In the movie version of Hammett (as well as in the book), the politicians and big bankers are in league with the underworld in a scheme to import young girls from China and force them into prostitution. Hammett follows a trail of clues through Chinatown opium dens and whorehouses till he makes his way to the top. "Just the cops, the crooks, and the big rich," he remarks as he walks in on a gathering of corrupt civic leaders and their flunkies. The assembled schemers have just had the tables turned on them by Crystal Ling, an imported Chinese girl resourceful enough to blackmail them.

At this point Hammett agrees

to go to work for the corrupt city fathers in order to cut a deal for them with Crystal Ling. It's a major departure from the plot of Gores' novel, and it has the effect of diminishing audience sympathy for Hammett. The tough, grizzled detective should be cynical all right, but only up to a point. Hammett's heroes may take money from questionable sources, but they do not give aid to the forces of evil when these are rich and influential. On the contrary, in novels like *Red Harvest*, Dashiell Hammett concentrated on the exposure and defeat of just such high level corruption as the movie has him working with.

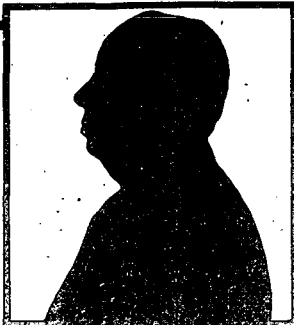
Another plot change has to do with Hammett's former partner. In the movie he pressures Hammett to come out of retirement by reminding him of an old obligation. Afterward, in another development that will distress purists, he proves to have turned dishonest. By contrast, in the novel this character is brutally murdered in the early going, just as Sam Spade's partner was in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. Evoking that novel, Gores made the partner's death serve as the motivation for Hammett's dogged pursuit of the case. The Hammett character in the movie seems to keep going only because he is being paid to do so by Orion Pictures/Warner Bros.

As a movie *Hammett* is best described as restful. It hardly varies from the pace of its leisurely opening in which shots of old San Francisco alternate with scenes of Hammett in his scruffy room at his typewriter. Rather than a tribute to Dashiell Hammett as a writer, the movie amounts to a rather academic attempt to honor "film noir"—the camera style of forties' and fifties' Hollywood thrillers much admired by European critics. In *Hammett*, German director Wim Wenders telegraphs his references to the genre by casting small roles for some of the surviving actors and directors of the period. Among them is a savvy old taxi driver played by the now aging Elisha Cook. Formerly he played the little man with a perpetual wide-eyed look of terror on his face—notably in *The Big Sleep* (1946), where he died horribly by poisoning.

The evocative cameo roles in *Hammett*—along with its painstakingly authentic photography—keep up a certain interest, especially for readers of old detective fiction. But even the most antiquarian readers come to that genre with some expectation of action and excitement. The paucity of these makes attendance at *Hammett* somewhat like reading a critical essay—one whose main points we already know.

FRAMES OF REFERENCE

by Peter Christian



A real haunted house? Well . . . it's possible. Recently this reviewer spent an afternoon prowling through the shadowy rooms of the Adam Thoroughgood House in the charming town of Norfolk—itsself crowded with the ghosts of history—on Virginia's Chesapeake Bay. Since shortly after it was built in 1636, this home, the first brick house in America, has been inhabited by vaguely ominous spirits. Furniture is often moved or broken in a way that suggests the house might be shifting. Visitors feel ghostly touches in the dark. Candles move from one end of a room to another. Bedspreads on beds in locked, empty chambers are found rumpled, as if someone had slept on them. The "Angel of Death" has been heard knocking outside the stout main door just before each Thoroughgood has gone to his or her reward. And, in the serenely pleasant English gardens that surround the house, "beasties"—carved animal heads mounted on high striped poles—stand sentinel, to protect those inside against evil.

If you don't have the opportunity to visit a real possessed house, however, haunted house movies are next best. There have been many of them through the years, giving us glimpses of ghosts through the camera's unflinching eye. Perhaps the most sensitive and charming in this genre is *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947), in which a young widow takes up residence in a New England cottage haunted by the spirit of an irascible sea captain. Her human pres-

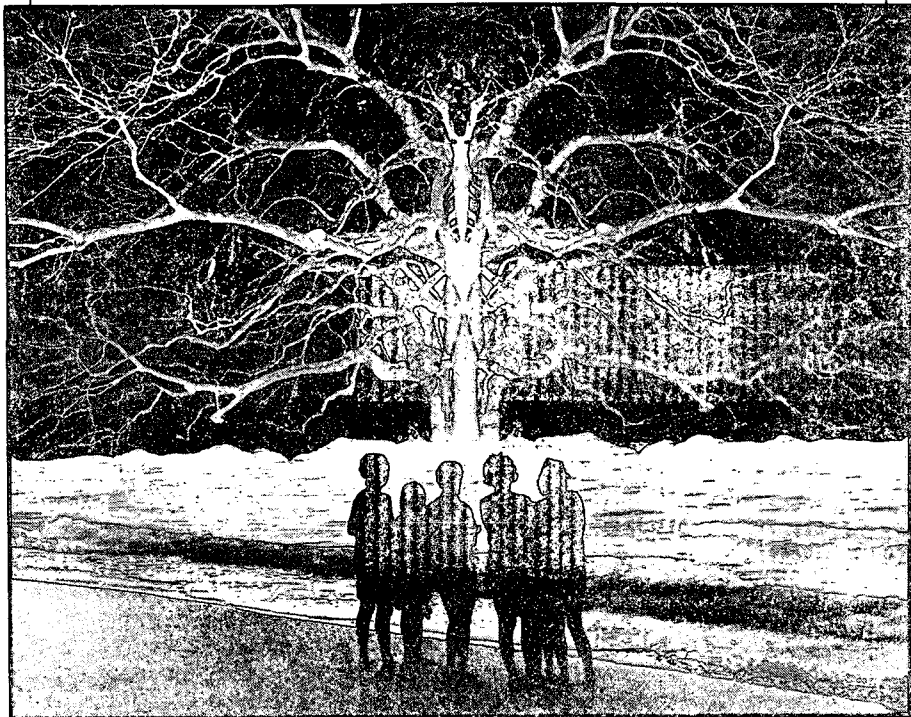
ence softens him, and slowly the two fall in love. Ghost conversion has occurred in other films, as well. In *The Canterville Ghost* (1947), from a story by Oscar Wilde, bogey-man Charles Laughton's two-centuries-old terrors are laid to rest by a little girl's heroism.

Few ghosts are so benign, however. In *The Uninvited* (1944), a classic drama of its kind, a young man tries to combat a nameless evil lurking in an old house. This spectral entity has fascinated the girl he loves. It is among the most spine-chilling films of all time. Less well known but as compelling is the British *Thunder Rock* (1942), starring James Mason and Michael Redgrave. In this film, a young dispirited lighthouse-keeper is given renewed hope by the spirits of those who have drowned in the sea below. Far more frivolous is the haunter in *The Ghost Goes West* (1936) who—when his ancestral Scottish castle is transported stone by stone to America for reassembling by an eccentric millionaire—just picks up and comes right along, to continue his manifestations in the New World.

In more modern screen dramas, the psychology of the terrorized victims is as important as the motivations of the ghosts themselves. In Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting* (1963), a timid group of psychic investigators spend a night in a crumbling New England house with a bad reputation. It becomes increasingly unclear whether the edgy terrors of the place are the workings of an actual ghost or pent-up forces unleashed from the visitors' own minds. Similar researchers decide to spend a week in a haunted manor in *The Legend of Hell House* (1973); some of their fears are self-induced, but the *real* ghost—when he manifests himself from a most unexpected quarter—is hair-curling. People with no special psychic expertise also find themselves in haunted houses. An average family takes up residence in an innocent-looking home in *Burnt Offerings* (1976); the demons lurking within try to kill them all off. A beleaguered suburban family manages to escape *The Amityville Horror* (1979), the film version of a supposedly true case of a dream home turned to nightmare.

Current trends in haunted house movies—such as *Poltergeist* and *Ghost Story*—have given us high-spirited wraiths, adding such flashy tricks as blood gushing from the kitchen sink and cadavers popping up out of the back garden. One almost feels that—as in the Adam Thoroughgood manifestations—subtler hauntings might be just as hair-raising: an unseen presence, a sudden touch, the simple terror of a knock on the door.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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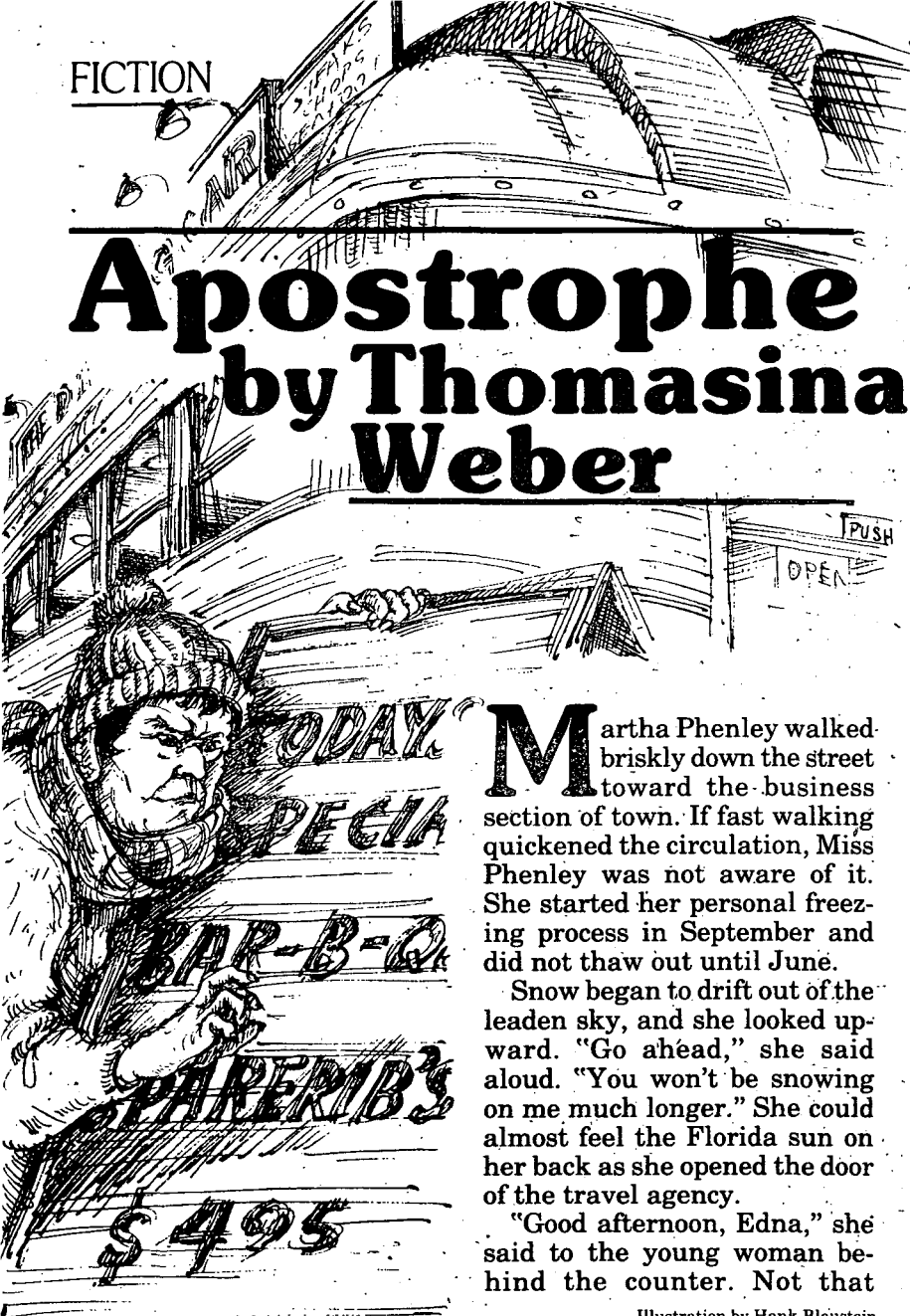
Why are they gathered here, and what are they witnessing? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 160.

FICTION

Apostrophe

by Thomasina Weber



Martha Phenley walked briskly down the street toward the business section of town. If fast walking quickened the circulation, Miss Phenley was not aware of it. She started her personal freezing process in September and did not thaw out until June.

Snow began to drift out of the leaden sky, and she looked upward. "Go ahead," she said aloud. "You won't be snowing on me much longer." She could almost feel the Florida sun on her back as she opened the door of the travel agency.

"Good afternoon, Edna," she said to the young woman behind the counter. Not that

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

twenty-eight would be considered young by the new crop of youngsters, but it was young to Martha Phenley. Edna had not changed much since she had sat in Miss Phenley's classroom. She was still homely, adenoïdal, and intelligent.

"Hello, Miss Phenley. I see it's starting to snow."

"Indeed it is. I am glad I won't be here to shovel it." The look that came over Edna's face chilled Miss Phenley further. "Don't tell me you didn't get my reservation?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Phenley. I'll keep trying."

"You have been trying for two weeks." Sporadically, no doubt, she thought. Edna always had been a little loose when it came to organization. She was forever misplacing textbooks, putting off her research until the deadline or doing the wrong assignment. A less intelligent student would never have got through high school.

"It's very hard to get plane reservations so close to Christmas," said Edna. "Now, if you were willing to wait until after the holidays—"

"I want to go now," said Miss Phenley, hoping her voice did not convey her intense desire to establish herself in a warm, alive atmosphere. She was not about to tell Edna Miller, or anyone else for that matter,

that sixty years in this forsaken place were sixty years too many, and since her retirement she could feel the cold and the inactivity drawing the very life out of her bones.

"I'll do all I can, Miss Phenley. I'll call you if I can arrange something, but it's pretty doubtful, this close to Christmas."

Miss Phenley left the office. It was snowing in earnest now. What is the world coming to, she wondered as she headed for The Dining Car and a cup of coffee. You would think if a person wanted to go somewhere, she could go. Granted, she had never taken a long trip before, but two weeks should be enough time for any reliable agency to secure travel reservations, holiday season or not. She had wound up her teaching career in June, and revelling in the unaccustomed luxury of freedom, she had fiddled away valuable time. Her bags had been packed and stacked in the foyer for two weeks. Everything was in readiness, but she was powerless to go. Frustration gnawed at her.

The snow wet on her face, she stopped at the corner to wait for the green light. Ahead, a portable sign at the curb in front of The Dining Car proclaimed the featured entree. She gritted her teeth as she read it: **TODAYS SPECIAL—BAR-B-QUED SPARE-**

RIB'S. The infantile spelling of barbecued was bad enough, but it was the apostrophes that raised her hackles.

It brought to mind similar signs she had been noticing around town. At Cane's Shoe Store: SALE TODAY ON LADIE'S SHOES. At the filling station: FREE LUBE. JOB WITH FILLUP'S. Although it annoyed her every time she read one, never had she experienced the intense feeling that now gripped her. What kind of businessman could be so ignorant as to set up signs bearing all those errors?

The light changed and she strode across the street and into The Dining Car, all thoughts of coffee gone. "I'd like to speak to the manager," she told the cashier, a heavily madeup, gumsnapping woman with henna hair.

"He's not here."

When it became apparent that the woman was not going to ask if she could be of help, Miss Phenley said, "I would like the name of the company in charge of your outdoor sign."

"Oh, that's over on Elm. Parsons Enterprises."

"Thank you," said Miss Phenley. She would absorb herself in something useful and take her mind off her frustrations.

She hardly noticed the snow as she marched toward Elm Street and Parsons Enter-

prises. It was inexcusable for a person to make so many mistakes when all he had to do was open a dictionary or a grammar textbook. There might be mitigating circumstances, however, so she ought to approach the man with an open mind. He might even welcome an offer of help.

Parsons Enterprises was a narrow slot between the hardware store and the bakery. Miss Phenley opened the door and went in. The first thing she saw were the soles of two shoes facing her on the desk. He must have been dozing, for when the bell on the door tinkled, a face surged upward into view as his swivel chair slapped upright.

He stared at her and then, jumping up, came around the desk to grab her hand with one large paw and clap her vigorously on the shoulder with the other.

"Well, I'll be damned if it ain't Miss Phenley!" he said.

His voice identified him beyond a doubt. He wore his hair rather long now, and bushy sideburns crawled across his face to meet beneath his fleshy nose.

"Alfred Parsons," she said. She might have known. She stuffed her gloves into her purse and snapped it shut.

"You remembered me after ten years!" he laughed, taking her back to the classroom and

his constant disruption of order. His delinquency had inspired the boys and reduced the girls to admiring giggles and pretended outrage. The year Alfred Parsons spent in her class had been one of the most exhausting in her teaching career.

"Where you keeping yourself these days, Miss Phenley? I hear you retired."

"I keep busy," she replied.

"Glad to hear it. I don't like to see old people set around and rot."

One thing Miss Phenley had learned in her lifetime was to control her emotions. She had a little trick for doing this. The first thing she did when aroused—and she was murderously aroused at that moment—was to concentrate on her mouth. She closed it, making sure her lips were relaxed rather than pressed together, and she ran her tongue around the inside of her teeth. This gave her something physical to devote her attention to. Some people clench their fists, but this tenses rather than relaxes, Miss Phenley had discovered, making it more difficult to gain control over one's emotions. Then she would say to herself, "Hold on, Martha, wait until later. Later you can kick the wall or smash a plate or do whatever you like to express your anger, but right now, remember you

are a lady."

It was not easy to do this time. "Are you responsible for those signs all over town?" she asked.

"Not bad, eh? It's a good business. They're on trailers, you know, and I haul them around to whoever wants to rent them and park them in front of their stores. Specials, promos, things like that."

"You may have a good business, but it's obvious that you don't care about your professional reputation."

"How do you figure that, Miss Phenley?"

"Because whoever puts those letters in the slots does not know how to spell."

Alfred's eyes widened and then he shouted with laughter. "Once a schoolteacher, always a schoolteacher," he said. "As a matter of fact, I set those letters myself. I'm the president, secretary, and janitor of Parsons Enterprises."

"Then you should be ashamed of yourself, Alfred Parsons. The atrocious spelling you use at times is bad enough, but your flagrant misuse of the apostrophe is appalling."

His face broke into that insolent grin she remembered so well. "That really bugs you, don't it?"

Alfred always had been a blockhead, and mule-headed besides. She was certain he

could have learned to spell correctly if he had so desired, but he could not have cared less. He was contrary, too, she recalled. If you asked him to do something, you could depend upon him to do it in exactly the opposite way out of sheer malice.

"It enrages me," she said. "Didn't any of my teaching get through to you?"

"Sure, Miss Phenley. I know it's wrong, but there ain't nothing I can do about it."

"There ain't?" she mimicked icily.

"No, I gotta follow the customer's copy to the letter."

"Even if it's incorrect?"

"You wouldn't believe the stink they raise if I change anything. Anyway, it don't make that much difference, Miss Phenley. You're the only one in this town who knows how to spell."

Pursing her lips in indignation, she ripped open her purse. Her nose was beginning to thaw and she groped frantically for her elusive handkerchief, flipping her gloves out in her search.

Alfred picked them up off the floor. "Hey, pret-ty nice," he said, examining them. "You didn't get them gloves in no bargain basement. Not with your name in the lining."

She snatched them out of his hand and, jamming them into her coat pocket, marched out of his office. She was seething in-

side at the insult, for an insult it was. Many of the people in this town had been Miss Phenley's students, and most of them had been good spellers. If her teaching had not remained with them, then she had been a failure as a teacher. It is not easy, she thought as she plodded through the thickening snow, to learn at the twilight of one's life that one has lived in vain.

It continued to snow all night and half the next day. Miss Phenley stood glumly by her window looking out at the silent whiteness. She had phoned Edna Miller that morning only to learn, as she had expected, that the girl had still not been able to get her a plane reservation. She would not be spending Christmas in Florida; she knew that now. She doubted that Edna was even trying. What did she care—what did anyone care—if Miss Phenley spent Christmas in cold storage? She might as well get used to the fact that the only one she could depend upon was herself. She regretted never having learned to drive. There had been no necessity for it, the local transportation system being entirely adequate for her needs. It would have been nice, though, to be able to get behind the wheel of a car now, today, and head south, her schedule contingent upon no one but herself.

She could even have taken a

bus to Florida if the bus drivers had not been on strike. She was almost desperate enough to go by train, but she could not bring herself to do it. She had been on a train that was involved in one of the worst rail disasters in history, and she had been fortunate to escape with her life. Since that day she had never set foot in another train, nor would she.

Maybe she ought to hitch-hike; she thought bitterly as she began to pace the room. The apartment that had been her home for the past twenty odd years suddenly seemed too small to contain her now. She wondered if she was developing claustrophobia late in life or if it was merely her mounting frustration. Whatever the reason, she could not endure the inactivity another minute. She had to do something, anything, to keep from screaming. Resolutely, she put on her boots and coat, picked up her purse, and left the house.

She questioned the wisdom of this as soon as the sharpness of the air knifed into her lungs. She might have felt smothered in her apartment, but at least she had been warm. She quickened her pace and was surprised to find herself a short time later in front of The Dining Car. According to the sign, the special of yesterday was also the special of today. Since

she would have to spend heaven only knew how many more weeks here, she might as well put the time to good use. Miss Phenley was not one to sit in a corner and pout. Oblivious to the stares of passersby, she stepped over the low picket fence and approached Alfred's sign, which blatantly advertised those miserable Spareribs's.

She broke two fingernails before she succeeded in removing the plastic apostrophe from the spareribs and positioning it properly in Today's. A great feeling of satisfaction came over her. Filled with a purpose, she went off in search of more signs. Since she did not have an itinerary mapped out, she did considerable backtracking and retracing of steps.

By early evening she was growing increasingly more elated as she fairly flew around town correcting the apostrophes. There is nothing like positive action to stimulate one's glands, she thought exultantly, and to infuse one's body with a feeling of vibrant wellbeing.

One of her backtracks took her past The Dining Car again, and what she saw stunned her glands into immobility. There was someone undoing the good work she had done! When he had replaced the apostrophe in Sparerib's he hurried away. Miss Phenley did not see his face, so she had no idea who he might

be. Incensed, she stepped over the fence again and strode to the sign.

Her enemy was stronger than she, for he had wedged the apostrophe in tightly and she could not get it out. It was possible, of course, that the guides behind which the plastic letters fitted were warped, but regardless of the reason, she was stymied.

Not for long. Her mind, no doubt honed to a fine edge by the bracing cold, directed her into The Dining Car, crowded with dinner hour customers. Without a flicker of apprehension she approached the counter, stepped behind it, and took a steak knife out of the receptacle. Everyone was too busy, too preoccupied, or too apathetic to care. Once outside, she made short work of the apostrophe with the knife and she left the sign delivering its message in a proper manner.

On a hunch, she returned to Cane's Shoe Store to see whether that sign had been tampered with. It glared at her ungrammatically, but she had no time to glare back or correct it again because the mysterious man was just rounding the corner.

Miss Phenley pursued him, keeping out of sight, and as she had expected, they wound up at the filling station, which was already closed for the night. He must have had a pocketful of

extra apostrophes, for he was replacing the one she had taken from Fillup's when Miss Phenley spoke.

"What do you think you're doing, young man?" He turned around. "Alfred!"

His face was dark with anger. "I might have known it was you when someone called me and said some woman was messing with my signs. What're you, nuts or something?"

"I knew you were doing it intentionally," she said, herself shaking with anger. "Everyone in town doesn't abuse apostrophes. You've always hated me, and now at last you've found a way to get back at me."

"Boy, you *are* buggy!" Miss Phenley was reaching for the newly-inserted apostrophe when he grabbed her wrist and spun her around. Her coat snagged on a corner of the sign and she heard something rip. "You keep your hands off my signs, you hear? If I catch you even looking at one of my signs again, I'm gonna haul you down to the pokey. Understand?"

She pulled her arm out of his grasp, for once in her life utterly speechless. How dare he address her in such a disrespectful manner? She had taught him absolutely nothing in the year she had had him in her class. And now, via these signs, he was spreading his ignorance, poisoning the young

minds of the town, teaching them—wrong. Before her, scowling and purple, stood the embodiment of her failure.

Her eyes never left his face as her hand dipped into her purse, brought forth the knife, and plunged it into his chest, all in one fluid movement. She watched dispassionately as his eyes showed incredulity, then glazed over. There, she thought triumphantly. That was better. A person should always wipe out his failures. Removing the apostrophe from the sign, she turned and walked home.

Positive action performs miracles, she told herself as she hung up her coat on the rack in the foyer and put the kettle on. Why, she wasn't even cold and she must have been out for hours.

There was more to it than that, though, she thought as she sat down with the steaming cup cradled between her hands. She had accomplished something, corrected an intolerable situation, tied up a loose end in the form of Alfred Parsons. Probably countless loose ends, since she had stopped him from multiplying his wrongdoing. Miss Phenley had never been one to leave things undone.

Her coffee cup had grown cold in her hands when the knock came at her door. She wondered how long she had been sitting there, musing. Setting the cup

on the coffee table, she was moving toward the door when the phone rang. She hesitated, glanced at the phone, then opened the door.

"Miss Phenley?" asked one of the policemen standing there. The phone continued to ring behind her.

"Yes," she said.

"You'd better answer your phone," he suggested.

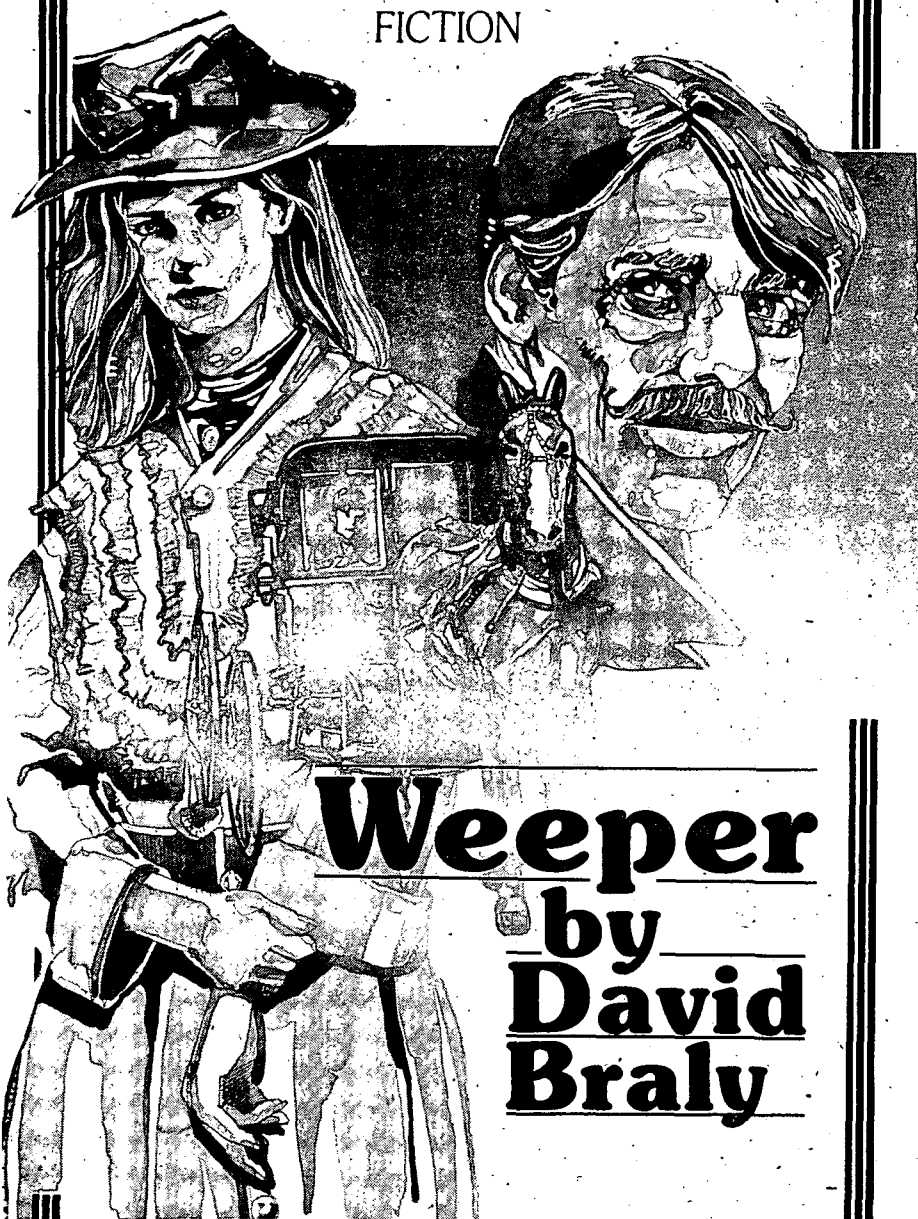
"Oh, of course. Won't you come in?"

They followed her into the living room and she turned to face them as she put the phone to her ear. For the first time she noticed that the one who had spoken to her was carrying a pair of women's gloves. Her eyes went to the coat rack in the foyer. The ripping sound—it had been her pocket. What had once been a tailored patch pocket now resembled a flap of skin peeled back and hanging. It was the pocket into which she had crammed her gloves in Alfred's office.

"Miss Phenley?" She became aware that the voice had been squawking in her ear for some time. "Did you hear what I said? Isn't it *wonderful*? I finally managed to get you a plane reservation and I've been calling you all afternoon, but there was no answer! Miss Phenley? Are you still there?"

"I'm still here," said Miss Phenley. "I'm still here."

FICTION



Weeper
by
David Braly

Illustration by Arthur George

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Perhaps no man on the whole of Washington's Olympic Peninsula was less trusted than James Palmer Cooke. He had never actually been accused of doing anything illegal or immoral and a few people trusted him more than they did anyone else in the world, but the vast majority of the population felt that his physical appearance and his gloomy personality were a reflection of something evil inside him. The fact that some people did trust him so completely was a catalyst for, and not a mitigation of, the suspicions of the others, who felt that if he were trusted without reason, and indeed when there was every reason for distrust, surely he had gained that trust by means sinister and evil.

Cooke had arrived in Port Townsend aboard a two-masted schooner from San Francisco in 1889, bringing with him a carpet-bag filled with clothes and a heavy and quite large trunk stuffed with books. He also brought a letter of recommendation from a San Francisco school where he had taught mathematics and science for six years. Neither the letter nor Mr. Cooke volunteered the reason why he had left San Francisco, but the Port Townsend school board were not suspicious and, had they been, probably wouldn't have inquired too closely anyway, there being at that time an acute shortage of qualified teachers on the peninsula. The letter, and a glance at Cooke's diploma from the California State Normal School, dated 1881 and signed by its prestigious president Charles H. Allen, were all the recommendations they required, and James Palmer Cooke was hired the day of his arrival to teach mathematics at the high school.

Only later did members of the board as well as other people in the community become aware of Cooke's strange behavior. He wasn't guilty of anything outlandish, merely of a gloominess and surliness that did not fit the general conception of how a schoolmaster should act. His appearance added to this impression, for he was a thin, stooped man who stood almost six four at a time when people generally were much shorter than they are today. He had enormous, bushy black eyebrows, restless and forever shifting green eyes, a large nose that had been broken at some time and in consequence was long, hooked, and bent slightly to the left, a drooping black mustache above enormous lips and crooked yellow teeth, and a jutting jaw cleft down the middle. His ears were big and long; his neck skinny, host to a huge Adam's apple; his hair shoulder-length, black, and stringy; his skin deeply brown and sun-aged; and he wore always a faded old black suit with patches on its elbows and knees, visible despite the near perfect match with

the rest of the material. Even so, Cooke would have been accepted had it not been for the odd behavior he exhibited, for the citizens of Port Townsend thought it only normal that a man of books be unconventional in dress and manners. What people would not tolerate was his refusal to return greetings, his apparent inability to smile, and his absorption in his books to the exclusion of all people and all other things. Nor were they pleased when word got around town that Cooke had told his class that Port Townsend was doomed and would soon become a ghost town.

They were even less pleased when it appeared that his terrible prediction would come true. All through the 1880's and into the early 1890's Port Townsend had been one of the nation's leading ports. The ships traveling up the Strait of Juan de Fuca to drop anchor there rivaled in number those that visited New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco. Port Townsend was a booming, bustling seaman's city, a shipping point for timber and iron, its prosperity evident by the multi-storied brick buildings along Water Street and by the three and four story Victorian houses that occupied the hills above the town. But in the mid-1890's the ships began to go elsewhere, and Port Townsend began to die. Activity on the docks was slow, many stores on Water Street closed, and deposits declined at the First National and other banks. Optimism drained out of the community's lifeblood, replaced by doubt, worry, and suspicion. Port Townsend began to lose population. Enrollment at the schools declined. The first teacher whose services the school board decided they could dispense with was James Palmer Cooke.

Everyone expected that Cooke would leave town after he lost his job. Even hoped he would. But he fooled them. He rented the building where Magennis's Chandler Store had been located and opened a "dealer in everything" shop, buying, selling, and trading. He must have had a knack for commerce because despite his unpopularity he managed to survive. All he did was survive, not prosper, but that was doing well in Port Townsend at the turn of the century. He lived in a room at the back of the store and was open for business fourteen hours a day, six days a week. On Sundays and holidays Cooke went for long walks through the wooded hills above town. He never showed the slightest interest in society, religion, or politics, which was thought to be rather peculiar, nor in women, which was thought to be most peculiar and more than a little suspicious. Indeed, there was no evidence that Cooke had ever had a girlfriend during his entire forty years of life, but most people attributed this oddity to his physical appearance rather than to any personal pref-

erence. And there were a few people in the area, as mentioned previously, who looked to Cooke for all manner of advice concerning not only when to plant their crops or what the weather might be like next year, but also sought him out to provide remedies for their ailments and solutions for their legal problems. Cooke, although looked upon as being stingy and even miserly with money, was generous with advice. It was said that no one ever took any sort of problem to him that he could not offer some opinion about.

Probably it came as no great surprise to Cooke that on the cold, foggy afternoon of October 27, 1901, a man who had traveled over from Port Angeles arrived in his shop to deliver a message from John Adair, who had stopped him on his way. The message was oral, to the effect that the presence of Mr. Cooke was much desired at the Adair farm as soon as Mr. Cooke could manage. This said, the traveler bade him good day and departed. Cooke wasted no time. The Adairs were one of those families who had respect for his opinions on all matters, and he closed his shop immediately. He went to Brown's Livery and rented a buggy and horse, then rode north out of town. The Adair farm was on the other side of the National Guard fort.

There were only three Adairs living on the farm now. Originally there had been five: John Adair, the head of the family; Molly, his wife, who, at forty-six, was ten years his junior; James, the eldest son; Cullen, the next eldest; and Thomas, the youngest. But James and Cullen had left the depressed Port Townsend area and gone to Oregon, where they were partners in a boat that trolled for salmon at the mouth of the Columbia. Tom remained. He was sixteen, handsome and strong like his father. Cooke had never taught Tom. But he had been a teacher to the older boys, and it was then that the Adairs had come to know and respect him. They were among the families who continually asked him for medical advice. He always gave it freely. Local physicians once hauled him into court for practicing medicine without a license, but they lost their case because they could not prove that the gifts he took from the families he advised were fees and there was no evidence that he ever took money in payment. Generally the medical advice he gave was correct. He even advised farmers on the sicknesses of their animals. Once, a mule on the Adair farm became sick and Cooke was called out. He examined the mule, pronounced that the malady was cholera; and ordered the Adairs to slaughter all their animals that had been in contact with the mule during the past two weeks. The Adairs did this, wiping out a third of their livestock,

and the cholera—or rather the disease he had declared to be cholera—did not spread further. After that the Adairs and Cooke's other admirers regarded him as a hero.

If Cooke had not loved the respect he held from people like the Adairs, he would never have made the journey that day. His threadbare coat, old suit, and faded derby were no protection from the piercing cold. The heavy fog made the air itself wet, and Cooke was damp and uncomfortable sitting on the buggy seat. He hated fogs. They reminded him of the frightening stories the grownups used to tell when he was a child in Louisiana. He had become accustomed to fogs when he lived in San Francisco, but had never learned to like them. It was bad enough indoors on a foggy day when the dampness penetrated the walls, but it was much worse being out in it, especially on the seat of a buggy with a journey of several miles ahead. The fog, which disappeared over the strait on one side of him and into the wooded hills of spruce and hemlock on the other, imposed an eerie, cold silence upon everything around him that was broken only by the pounding hooves of his horse and the creaking of the buggy wheels. Although Cooke was a man of science and as such not frightened by elements of nature, the grey silence put him on edge. He would have been glad to hear even the hollow moan of a foghorn, just to know that there were other people out there, but although that sound was familiar in San Francisco and not uncommon on the strait, today he did not hear it.

During the long journey to the Adair farm he failed to meet any other human being. His horse continued to trot into the endless grey, more sure than Cooke of the road, while Cooke himself shifted positions on the seat minute after minute, trying to find more warmth or comfort than he had thus far discovered. Dark spots would appear in the fog, which, as the buggy drew nearer, gradually hardened in outline and shade, becoming at last spruce or hemlock trees. For a while they were beside a rail fence, each splinter clear at ten feet but the rails beyond vanishing into the universal grey. The posts became visible in the grey as the buggy approached them, gradually strengthened in form until it had passed them. Each post did that in turn, and Cooke played a mental game of guessing when the last post would appear. Eventually it did. Afterward there were only the spruces and hemlocks and pines, until they reached and passed the great gate of the fort, at which time Cooke realized that despite all the bumpy travel and damp discomfort he was only halfway to his destination. He settled into the left corner of the seat, pulled the collar of his coat tighter around his neck, and

waited for the buggy to reach the Adair farm. He continued to stare at the appearing and vanishing forms of trees, fence posts, and, occasionally, cows, but did so without interest. It would have interested him greatly had he met another human being on that road, if only to prove that he was not the only man insane enough to be there, but he met no one. He would have closed his eyes and tried to sleep despite his discomfort, but if he did he would miss seeing the weathered rail gate that opened into the Adair farm.

Eventually he reached that gate. It appeared slowly out of the fog, fuzzy at first and then clearer, until there was no doubt that it was a gate nor which gate among all the gates of the world it was. Cooke reined in the horse, got down, and opened it. He led the horse through, then closed the gate, and remounted the buggy. He could not see the Adair house and barn, but he knew where they were. Cooke had been in both. The house was a two story, white clapboard structure with a red shingle roof and red-framed bay windows. It was about fifteen years old, having been built over the ruins of an older log house, and was solid and warm. Cooke liked it. He also liked the Adair barn, larger than the house, sturdy and red. The house and barn were only fifty feet from each other, and both two hundred feet from the gate, so Cooke wondered whether he would see the white house first or the red barn. He saw the barn first.

When Cooke stopped the buggy, the front door of the house opened and John Adair stepped out onto the porch. Standing five nine, he was a big barrel-chested and muscular man. His hair was brown and moderately long, and like Abraham Lincoln, who had spent most of his life in the Adairs' home town of Springfield, Illinois, he wore a beard but no mustache. He had a round, handsome face, and lively if somewhat nervous brown eyes. John Adair had been a farmer all his life. While not an educated man, he was better read than most and had managed to acquire a complete set of Ridpath's *History of the World*, bound in leather, around the bookcase of which the sofa and chairs of the living room had been arranged.

John Adair stepped off the porch and approached Cooke. "Why Mr. Cooke, I didn't expect you out here this afternoon—especially in this fog."

"You sent word that you needed me. I always try to go where I'm needed."

"Well, yes, but we didn't look for you today. Hoped you might come out tomorrow, but . . ."

Cooke got down from the buggy and shook hands with Adair. "What's the problem, John? Another sick animal?"

"Wish it was."

"Oh?"

"It's my son. Tom, that is. He's been acting crazy."

When they entered the house, Cooke was struck by the sharpness in detail of everything in the living room. He couldn't remember ever before seeing colors as bright nor lines as sharp. Being in the fog for so long had done that, had made his eyesight sharper at least for a while, or maybe just made it seem sharper. Several small logs were crackling in the fireplace. The Adairs had nice furniture, most of it aimed at the oak bookcase beside the fireplace, and the room reflected their mild prosperity. Most important to Cooke at the moment was that the room was warm and dry.

"We weren't expecting you today," Molly Adair repeated, standing at the kitchen door. She was a short woman with sparkling hazel eyes. Although she was a decade younger than her husband, the tough and hard life of the farm had aged her more. Her face was deeply wrinkled and her hair showed only a few streaks of auburn amid the grey. "Can I get you a cup of coffee or something?"

"A cup of hot chocolate, if you have it."

"Certainly." She disappeared into the kitchen.

Cooke sat on the sofa. It was long and green and protected by a red cloth cover. John Adair sat opposite Cooke in the room's only armchair, also green. The sofa's right side was near the left side of the chair, and they were at a forty-five-degree angle to one another, with the bookcase and fireplace forming the base of the triangle. In this way Adair and Cooke were able to face each other by looking to their sides. A coffee table was in front of both the chair and the sofa, with flowers, an ashtray, and the latest newspaper from Seattle resting on it.

"Now," said Cooke, "what's this problem with Tom?"

"Do you remember the Greer girl?"

"Greer," said Cooke thoughtfully.

"Samantha Greer."

"Yes, of course. Fifteen years old, blonde, pretty, but mentally unbalanced. She realized it and . . . That was the year I arrived in Port Townsend. It happened near here, didn't it?"

"At the Tankard Cave, about half a mile behind this house, on the strait."

"Yes, I remember now. Tragic. But what's that got to do with young Tom?"

"He . . . uh . . ." Adair cleared his throat. "He's been . . . He says he's been seeing her. That they're in love with each other."

"In love? But, John, the Greer girl is——"

"I know. Dead."

"I didn't know she was dead when I first saw her," said Tom. He'd been called down from his bedroom and was seated on the sofa next to Cooke. He was a broad-shouldered boy with long brown hair and a classical face only slightly marred by large ears. His eyes were brown, like his father's, and nervous. He fingered the lowest button of his plaid shirt while he talked. "I just thought she was a girl like any other when she appeared in the barn."

"I see," said Cooke. "And where did she come from, Tom?"

"I don't know, sir. I was cleaning out a stall and suddenly felt I was being watched. I turned around, and she was standing there looking at me, and smiling. She was all there. I mean, solid, not a cloud or anything like that."

"Then what?"

"She said hello, and I said hello, and first thing you know we were talking. She was very nice."

"Go on."

"Well, I saw her after that almost every day. Almost every day for more than a week now."

"Always in the barn?" asked Cooke.

"Yes." Tom's eyes were wide and piercing. They looked to Cooke like the eyes of a madman he'd seen once in San Francisco. "Until yesterday."

"What happened yesterday?" asked Cooke.

"We met in the barn again. We were talking and I asked her where she lived."

"And what did she say?"

"She said that she didn't live anywhere, but she would show me where she stayed. I asked her what she meant, and she said to follow her. So I did. She took me out across the fields toward the strait. She went down the bluff on an old trail, and then over to Tankard Cave. She said that was where she stayed. I looked around and didn't see any personal belongings. I had figured she was a gypsy or something, but by then I was thinking she was pulling a joke. I asked her about there not being any personal belongings there. She said she didn't need anything, that she had everything she needed except someone to be with her."

"When he returned home," said John Adair, "he told me about this girl and described her. She fit the description of the Greer girl who committed suicide at Tankard Cave twelve years ago."

"And you sent for me," concluded Cooke.

"Not then," said John Adair. "I thought it might be some girl pulling a joke on Tom. I didn't know who it could be. The area is thinly populated enough that a boy ought to know every girl around here who's his age. I figured it had to be a joke, though. Until this morning."

"What happened this morning?"

Molly Adair entered the room carrying a small white tray with two white cups on it. She placed the tray on the coffee table, then returned to the kitchen. John Adair lifted one of the cups, Cooke the other. Cooke sipped gingerly of the hot chocolate. It was delicious. Warming.

"I went out to the barn," said Tom. "She was there. Pa had told me about Samantha Greer after I told him about the girl. I'd heard about her before, of course, but never what she looked like. Anyway, she and I talked. Eventually I said as how I didn't know her name and she said she'd rather not say what it was. So I asked her straight out if it was Samantha Greer."

"And what happened?" asked Cooke between sips.

"She was silent for more than a minute. She just stood there looking at me. Finally she said, 'Someone told you, didn't they?' And I said, 'Is that your name?' And she said, 'Yes, I'm Sammie Greer.'"

Tom stopped his story and looked over at his father. Cooke could see that the boy was scared.

"Tell him the rest," John Adair told his son.

Tom looked at Cooke, obviously struggling to speak but unable to. Then he blurted it out: "After that she vanished."

"Vanished?"

Tom looked down at his lap.

His father said, "The boy claims that she disappeared into thin air. Says she did it while he was standing there looking at her. One moment she was there, the next she wasn't. Just like that."

Cooke placed his cup of chocolate on the coffee table. The boy beside him was near collapse. Cooke placed his left hand on Tom's right shoulder and spoke his name. The boy lifted his head and looked at Cooke.

"Do you honestly believe," asked Cooke, "that you saw the ghost of Samatha Greer?"

Tom started to answer, choked on the words, and then managed to say: "Y-Yes. I-I don't wan-nta believe it, M-Mr. Cooke, but I saw it. I can't say I didn't when I did. Sh-She was there one second and gone the next. Like a m-mirage. I don't believe in ghosts, but—but what other explanation is there?"

Cooke nodded, then stared out the bay window that was on one side of the fireplace, in the same position as the bookcase on the other side. He could see that it was still foggy outside, but the fog was being blown away by an ocean breeze. It would be gone soon. He hoped it would be completely gone before he had to start back to Port Townsend.

"Do you believe me, Mr. Cooke?"

"I believe you saw what you say you saw."

"You do?" Tom's voice was filled with relief.

"Yes," said Cooke sadly. "But that doesn't mean that what you saw exists."

"Huh?"

Cooke faced the boy again. "I think you saw someone, but I don't think she was there."

"But that's impossible."

"No. It's the same as the mirage you mentioned."

Tom stared at Cooke for a moment, then looked down at his lap again. He was still trembling.

John Adair told his son to go into the kitchen to see if his mother needed help with anything.

"Well?" Adair asked Cooke when the kitchen door had shut. "Is my son going insane?"

Cooke swallowed hard. "Yes," he said.

John Adair sprang to his feet and began pacing the floor. Back and forth he walked, five times to and from the nearby fireplace, then he stopped in front of the fireplace with his back to Cooke. "What can I do?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Cooke. He started to reach for his cup, then decided it would be bad manners to sit sipping chocolate at such a time. "There's one thing that we've got to do, though."

"What?" Adair turned to face Cooke.

"We've got to make him see that what he thinks he saw and heard were only tricks of his mind. We must make him realize that. It may not cure him, but it might be a step in that direction. It might at least put him on guard against further hallucinations."

John Adair nodded. "Tom, come in here!" he shouted.

And so, for an hour, they worked on the boy. Cooke made him

repeat every experience he'd had with the imaginary girl, then forced him to say after each recollection: "This did not happen. This is only something I made up in my own mind." At first Tom was reluctant, but after he'd renounced two or three memories he realized that Cooke and his father were right, that they were trying to help him, and he willingly did as instructed. Sweating like a malaria victim, yet also shivering despite the warmth of the room, Tom became anxious that he not forget any word that the ghost had spoken to him, for he could not renounce it if he failed to remember it. He denied the girl, denied the ghost, and affirmed that everything was an invention of his own mind, brought about by the loneliness of the farm and by some deep sickness within his head that he hitherto had had no knowledge of.

When all of this was accomplished, Cooke had the boy put a coat over his sweat-drenched shirt, and together they walked out to the big red barn. Only patches of the fog remained. The breeze from the strait was stronger now, as cold and penetrating as the fog had been.

Inside the barn Cooke had the boy say: "I, Thomas Adair, do hereby deny the existence of any ghosts or apparitions, most particularly any belonging to the late Samantha Greer, and state that I do not know her, have never known her, and have no wish to ever know her."

Tom was weak when Cooke led him out of the barn. "I'm glad that's over," he said.

"It's not," said Cooke. "You've got to repeat those words one other place."

"Where?"

"Tankard Cave."

The walk to the bluff seemed longer than the half mile it actually was. They walked straight into the piercing cold breeze. It wasn't a strong breeze, just powerful enough to rustle the tips of the grass and the upper branches of the spruce trees, but it didn't have to be strong when it was cold. By the time they started down the bluff they both had chattering teeth and were shivering.

Tankard Cave was twenty feet high and twenty-five feet long, embedded in the green bluff that was the demarkation between the Adair farm and the Strait of Juan de Fuca. When Cooke and the boy arrived, the blue-grey waters of the strait were snapping upon the grey sand a mere twenty feet from the cave's entrance. Soon, the tide in, the water would be up to the cave itself. Cooke looked at the sand in front of it, seeking the footprints of Tom

Adair. There were none. Perhaps he had only imagined being at the cave yesterday. More likely he'd been there and the tide had washed away his footprints, leaving in their stead only a few pieces of driftwood and a fisherman's floater.

"Repeat what you said inside the barn," Cooke told the boy.

Tom walked to the middle of the cave's mouth, stood erect with his arms hard against his sides, and, with his eyes clenched shut, he again renounced Samantha Greer.

A terrible chill went down Cooke's spine. He looked around him, then out to the strait. The other side of it was barely visible, a mere line of black riding above the liquid grey horizon. The waters were tossing and splashing; the breeze had become a wind. Everything—the sky, the water, the sand—was grey. And yet the fog was gone completely.

"How did I do?" asked Tom.

Cooke faced him and smiled. "You did fine, boy. Now let's get back."

They returned with the cold wind pushing them, with the trees and the grass shaking viciously around them, with the clouds outracing them. Cooke's legs were tired. But he hurried along faster than the boy, who was no longer weak, but, purged of his insane thoughts and reinforced with the enthusiasm of a convert, walked strong and happy. Occasionally the wind blowing through the trees created a howling sound, and when that happened Cooke could feel the hair rise on the back of his neck. He was scared. Spooked by talk of a ghost and by the breaking down of a boy whose brothers he had taught. He tried to think himself out of it. After all, he was a man of science. Ghosts did not exist; insanity, while unfortunate, happened to some people. It was all very sad but it was logical. Nothing to fear. He would almost convince himself, when suddenly the wind would create another howl and he would again feel the hairs on his neck stand on end.

Never had anyone been as happy to see the Adair house as James Palmer Cooke was that afternoon when it was finally back in view.

John Adair was grateful for Cooke's help. Profusely grateful. He put a bag of potatoes into Cooke's buggy. He invited Cooke to stay the night, pointing out that it would be dark by the time he reached town if he left now, but Cooke refused.

Cooke had started driving away when he heard the noise. It was loud and came from the barn. It sounded like someone weeping. A woman or a girl.

He looked back toward the house. John and Molly Adair had

already gone inside with Tom. They were not making the strange noise, nor would they be able to hear it inside. Cooke could barely hear it. Although it had to be loud to be heard where the buggy was (Cooke had stopped when he heard the noise), he could barely distinguish it from the howls of the wind.

He wrapped the reins around the brake handle and stepped down. He walked toward the barn. The front doors were open. The barn loomed larger as Cooke walked closer, big and red and huge against the black clouds racing across the cheerless grey sky.

The closer he walked, the more distinctly the noise sounded like a girl weeping.

He slowed his pace. His heart was pounding. He was hot. His stomach was electric.

The weeping stopped.

For a moment he stood there, ten feet from the butterfly doors of the big red barn, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. He heard only the howling of the wind and the distant lowing of cattle. He saw only the black interior of the barn—free of ghostly movements.

After a minute or more of standing there and waiting, Cooke took a step forward. Then another, and another, and another.

Finally he was inside the barn. It was dark because the day was dark, but other than that there was nothing strange there, nothing to distinguish it from a hundred other barns. There was hay scattered on the wooden floor, empty stalls, a pile of ropes, a few pieces of farm equipment, and a loft with more hay, in bales.

He laughed out loud at his own foolishness. The boy's insane imaginings had spooked him good.

He turned and walked toward the doors.

Suddenly—just as he reached the doors—he was physically struck by something cold, something that penetrated his clothes and his skin and that chilled his very bones, while at the same instant a loud, terrible wail assaulted his ears—the distinct, unmistakable weeping of a young woman.

He ran.

He didn't look back, didn't stop to investigate, didn't do anything else—just ran.

Cooke didn't stop running until he reached the buggy. Then, with the noise still coming from the barn, he undid the reins and used them to whip the horse into a gallop. "Hyah! Hyah! Hyah!" he cried at the top of his voice, whipping with the reins, terrifying the horse more than he himself was terrified, almost overturning

the buggy as it cleared the Adair gate, speeding past Mr. Williams' wagon, which happened to be passing by, and causing Mr. Williams' horse to rear up-and Mr. Williams to open his mouth in astonishment. Cooke continued at that breakneck speed all the way into Port Townsend.

Brown, at the livery stable, was furious. He demanded an extra two dollars as compensation for the added wear on his buggy and the condition of his horse. And Cooke, a miser if there ever was one, paid it without argument or complaint. He then left the livery and returned to his store.

It was observed by several people that Mr. Cooke's lights were on quite late that night. Also, they were on quite early the next morning. Someone wondered aloud if perhaps Mr. Cooke had left his lights on all night. But that was laughed at, for Cooke was not a man to waste money by having all his lights burning through the night. Even if he himself remained awake, surely one light would suffice.

The reason for the lights in Cooke's store was learned during the afternoon. A farmer named Samuel London had gone to visit his friend John Adair shortly before noon. London generally timed any visit for the noon hour in hopes of being invited to share the family lunch. What he found at the Adair house was not lunch, but rather something that ruined his appetite for the remainder of the week. London rushed into town to report what he'd found. The sheriff rode out to the farm with all his deputies except Cory Miller. And it was fortunate for Cooke that Miller had been left behind. Because, although London accompanied the sheriff back out to the Adair farm, word of his discovery swept through Port Townsend like indigestion on a feast day. Within minutes everyone knew. And within half an hour, Williams had remembered and told everyone who would listen how he had been driving his wagon past Adair's gate the previous day along about dusk and how that crazy man James Cooke had come out like he was being chased by a stampede of buffaloes. When folks put that information together with their natural dread and distrust of Cooke, and the fact his lights had burned all night (a guilty conscience, they said), they realized that the perpetrator had to be James Cooke. There was no doubt about it. Word spread. A mob formed.

Cory Miller took his duties seriously. He had been sworn to uphold the law, and as a good Christian, he did not take an oath lightly. When he was told that a mob was gathering in front of James Cooke's store, he grabbed a carbine and went outdoors, out

into the piercing cold wind that was blowing from the strait, and walked toward the mob, to put himself and his weapon between them and the man that even he now believed to be the perpetrator.

Cory Miller faced down the mob that day. He spoke to the crowd, called the individuals who composed it by their first names, and told them that if they planned to lynch James Cooke, they'd have to kill him first. He reminded them that Port Townsend was not a lynch town, but a place where the law was upheld and order was respected. He called upon them to disperse, and assured them that if they found Cooke guilty he would surely hang by his neck until he was dead, dead, dead. The men were less than satisfied, but they were unwilling to murder Miller in order to string up James Cooke. They dispersed.

Miller then turned and knocked loudly upon the locked door of the store until it was opened.

Cooke was there, peeking out at Miller, sweat on his brow and fear in his green eyes. "What's going on?" he asked. "Why were they after me?"

"I think you'd better come with me," said Miller.

"Why?"

"For one thing, you'll be safer in jail than you will here. Those men are angry. They might come back."

"Yes . . . yes, of course." Cooke opened the door wide so that Miller could step inside. "I'll get my hat and be right with you."

"Good."

A moment later Cooke had returned from his back room. He wore his faded black suit and derby. He looked terrified. "Am I under arrest?" he asked.

"Yes," said Miller. "If the sheriff finds something that implicates someone else, then we can always let you go later."

"Implicates someone else in what?"

"Sam London found the Adairs dead this morning. Slaughtered. Blood all over the place. We know that you were out there late yesterday, so it's murder we're thinking about."

More than two hundred people attended the funeral of the Adairs. Many mere acquaintances were there, and all of their friends except James Palmer Cooke. Everyone on the peninsula was shocked by the triple slayings. No less shocking was the manner in which it was done. John Adair had been stabbed five times with a butcher knife, every wound in his back; his wife Molly had several wounds on her hands, but the

fatal wounds were in her heart and neck; young Tom bore a single stab wound in his heart, where the butcher knife was lodged upside down. Blood was all over the living room, where the bodies were found.

A hearing was held soon afterward in the Jefferson County courthouse to determine if there was sufficient evidence to bind over James Palmer Cooke for trial. There was. His lawyer, Zeb Whitney, requested a change of location, arguing that public opinion was so hostile that Cooke could not possibly receive a fair trial in Port Townsend or anywhere on the Olympic Peninsula. Judge Carter granted the request. Seattle was chosen as the place of trial.

The Seattle courtroom of Judge Winslow Singleton was crowded with spectators when the trial started at winter's end. Among the spectators were several dozen from Port Townsend, almost all against Cooke, and the two sons of John and Molly who had been living in Oregon. Singleton kept the crowd quiet throughout the trial, less because of any sense of judicial duty than to impress the reporters. The judge, a tall whitehaired man with a ruler-straight back and a huge, positively wild mustache, wanted to be governor of Washington someday and wasn't above catering to popular whim. He knew that public opinion was against Cooke; his rulings were lopsided in the prosecution's favor. The reporters wrote what a splendid and even-handed job Judge Singleton was doing, and the public parroted this praise. Likewise the courtroom crowd, aware that Singleton was doing a "good job" on most of the rulings he made, were less upset by those few he made that favored the defense.

Prosecuting the case was a fat, short little man with a pock-marked face, Henry Grant. Grant called Cooke a murderer, a savage, a "vile, wicked creature fit only to retrieve garbage from the slums of European cities." Despite his invective, however, the crux of Grant's case was the testimony of witnesses. Williams told how Cooke had shot out of the Adair gate on the fatal day, Brown about the state of the rented buggy and horse, and other witnesses recollected how the Cooke store's lights were on for an entire night, in violation of every miserly principle held dear by the man.

Zeb Whitney countered by calling the sheriff and Cory Miller. Both of these lawmen testified that no blood had been found on the person or clothes or in the abode of Cooke, and gave it as their expert opinion that had he committed the crime there would have been blood on his clothes and shoes. This was convincing testimony. It might have saved the neck of Cooke had he not insisted upon

being allowed to tell his side of the story.

What Cooke told was a ghost story. He repeated to the jury everything that had happened, including the wail from the barn. His lawyer's face was a picture of honest misery.

Henry Grant rose from his chair and approached the witness stand. "Are you telling us, Mr. Cooke," he asked, "that the ghost of Samantha Greer murdered the Adairs?"

"I know it sounds ridiculous, and as a man of science I —"

"Just answer the question."

"Very well. I know what I heard, Mr. Grant. And I know what the poor Adair boy told me. I refused to believe Tom, but then I heard the weeping of that girl."

"Of the ghost?"

"Yes."

"I repeat," said Grant. "Are you asking us to believe that John, Molly, and Tom Adair were murdered by the ghost of a girl who committed suicide a dozen years ago?"

Cooke's Adam's apple shot up, then down. "Yes," he said.

Grumbles and moans spread through the courtroom. Judge Singleton demanded order, but frowned at Cooke to show where his sympathies lay. Cooke looked shocked by the angry reaction. Zeb Whitney, a good country lawyer who seldom believed in his clients but who did believe in Cooke, slumped in his chair, resting his chin on his upturned hands.

Henry Grant walked back to the prosecution table, saying, "No further questions of this murderer, your Honor."

In his closing argument Zeb Whitney concentrated upon the lack of blood on Cooke's clothes and other possessions. He ignored his client's claims about why he'd gone out to the Adair farm (the two surviving Adairs had testified that their brother had always been mentally sound) and Cooke's belief that a girl's ghost had murdered the family in revenge for Tom's renouncing her. He insisted that they ignore Grant's earlier closing argument—in which the prosecutor had branded Cooke "a twisted, evil fiend of a creature whose mind is filled with apparitions and murder"—and remember only the evidence. The testimony of Williams and Brown, he said, was circumstantial and meant nothing, but that of the sheriff and his deputy was expert and meant everything.

The jury was out for twenty minutes. Their verdict: guilty of murder, three counts. Judge Singleton thanked the jury members "for doing a difficult job exceedingly well."

The grass was green, the sky was blue, and the air was warm.

that day in mid-June of 1902 when James Palmer Cooke mounted the gallows inside the grey stone walls of the Washington State Prison. "I am innocent," he said, and then the trap door sprang and he was dead.

No one in Port Townsend actually celebrated the hanging of Cooke, but many people there did feel relief that the dirty business was over and done with. Almost everyone believed that another murderer had received his just deserts. Most of them were also pleased that the sinister man who had for so long haunted their community was gone. But a few people continued to admire Cooke and to defend his memory. They claimed he had been wrongly accused, that even if there was no ghost at the Adair farm it had not been James Cooke who murdered the family.

The elder sons of John and Molly Adair inherited their parents' farm. They took a careful inventory, found nothing missing, and declared that to be further proof that Cooke had been the murderer and not some thief or passing tramp. They put the farm up for sale. Times were hard in the area and they had to cut the price more than once, but eventually they sold it to a family named Peterson. They used the money to buy a second troller and an interest in a fish processing plant.

Late in the fall of 1916 Hans Peterson was leaving the big red barn with his work mules when there came from the building a loud noise, identical in sound to the weeping of a young woman. The mules were startled, panicked, and one broke free from Peterson's strong grip. The animal was found an hour later munching on grass near the rail fence that separated the Peterson and McEwen farms. Peterson managed to restrain the other mule, led him away from the barn and around the house, where he tied him to a cedar tree. Then he walked back to the barn and, with the wail still coming from it, entered the open butterfly doors. For a moment Peterson stood motionless, listening to the loud noise and trying to determine where it came from. When at last he decided that it originated in the loft, he climbed the ladder that led there, and then walked across it in search of the source. What he eventually found was a small hole (one foot high and less than an inch wide) in the side of the barn, through which the strong wind from the strait entered. The shape of the hole, combined with a splinter that divided it in half, produced the noise in much the same way the sound of a whistle is created. Peterson stuffed hay in the crack, and the weeping sound stopped dead.

When Peterson told about the noise and its source in Port Town-

send, people who had believed Cooke said, "You see, he told the truth. That boy just got him spooked and Cooke forgot his scientific training. His crime was not trusting his own knowledge."

In 1983, Howard Percell agreed. Percell, a historian, was compiling a book about the great true Washington murder mysteries. He intended to include the Adair case. He examined the transcript of the trial and all the other documents he was able to locate relating to the case. When Percell had completed this phase of his investigation he told a friend who was interested in the case: "The solution was right there before Cooke, if only he hadn't been such an egotist about his scientific and other abilities. Thinking he cured Tom Adair. Well, he didn't. And his story about a ghost discredited him so badly that no one believed him when he testified that the boy had been insane."

The next phase of Percell's investigation was an on-site inspection of the old Adair farm. He went through the house, and out to where Tankard Cave used to be before it collapsed in 1937. It gave him a feeling for the area but did not increase his knowledge of the murders. And the wind was not blowing, so he couldn't be sure what it was like for James Palmer Cooke that terrible day. He walked back to the house.

Then he examined the ground where the barn used to stand before it was torn down in 1959. He stood where it had stood and thought deeply about the murders.

That was when he heard—

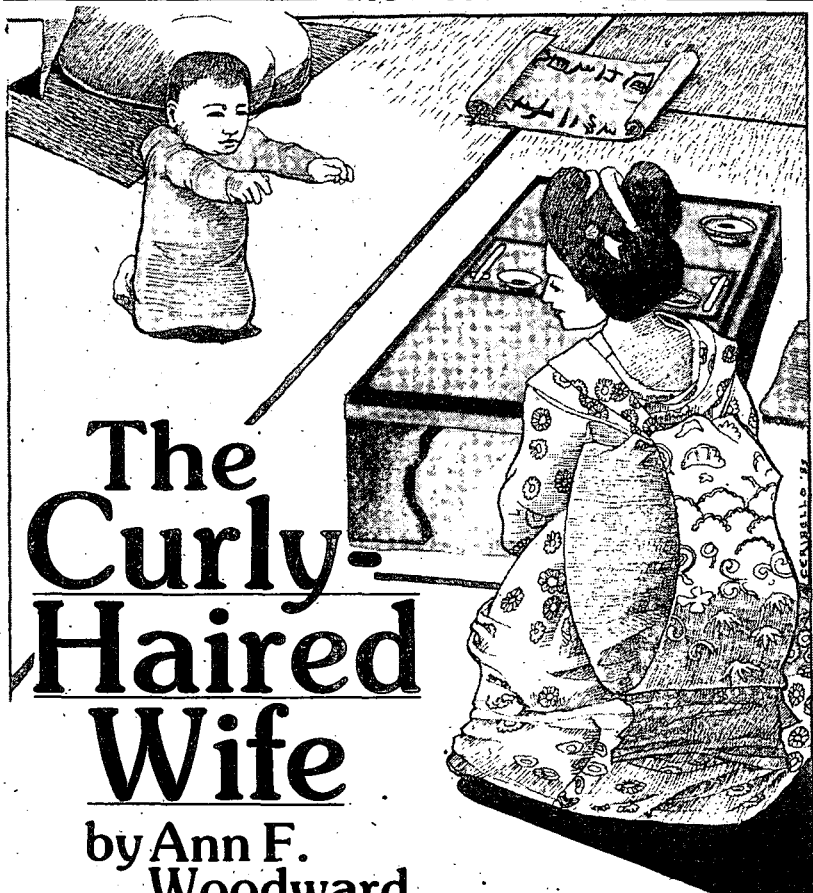
"Oh no!"

He ran away.

The Adair case is not mentioned in the book, which was published last week. In fact, Port Townsend itself is mentioned only once—in the dedication: "To four victims of an insane murderer at Port Townsend."

Solution to the Mid-September "Unsolved":

Red killed Miller.



The Curly-Haired Wife

by Ann F.
Woodward

It was at the beginning of the white winter that the palace burned. The Lady Aoi always afterward thought of it like that, "the year of the white winter." This was not only because there was snow in all its forms that year but also because she had the opportunity to see that winter season in the company of an unusually careful observer and it remained in her memory as a clear, white space of time.

Early in the Eleventh Month the first snow fell and until well after the New Year the capital was a place without color, white with ever-renewed snow. It came quietly first, seeming to swell from the air, busy in its descent, dropping onto every angle of leaf and stone and fence, folding in heavy layers along the ground and on the roofs. Afterward there were blizzards, flurries and wind-shaken showers, thaws and sudden freezes, icicles, sharp crusts and sparkling bits of frost snapped from the cold air to float in the sunshine. Always the striking thing was that color and shape were lost or altered. The snow had created a new world.

Even the fire, when it happened, was a pale thing. It came on a sunny day, and though the flames soared from the rooftops, the sun was so bright and the hills behind the palace so white with snow that the fire was robbed of its light. Aoi's strongest impression was not of fire but of rolling black smoke.

It was mid-morning when the first cries of alarm were heard. The fire had started in the building behind the wing where the princess and her women had their apartments. Having wide experience of fires, everyone at once collected personal belongings, directed the servants calmly in the packing, and chose a spot well away from the buildings where the bundles and boxes could be stacked on mats until the danger was past. This time there was no procession of servants carrying the bundles back. Wind increased the original blaze, and all the buildings in the northeast corner of the palace enclosure were destroyed, including the women's wing.

The princess moved to her father's house. Some of her women went with her, but Aoi went instead to stay with the Middle Counselor, whose wife was a distant relation. He came himself in an elegant palm-leaf carriage with two extra runners and a cart, to help with the luggage. The chest containing all her Chinese scrolls was first placed in the cart, then Aoi and her maid were helped into the carriage and they began the ascent into the eastern hills, where the counselor had his house.

"I am afraid we are not taking you to a very fashionable section," he said. "We are rather on the edge of things out here. It embarrasses me to have you see my poor house. I am sure we can make you comfortable but for someone who is used to life at the palace . . ."

"No, no, no," Aoi murmured behind her fan. "It is I who should apologize. We are imposing on you. You are so kind to take us in."

All this was standard politeness. Aoi knew that the counselor lived in an area crowded with high government officials and popular because of its nearness to the palace. His house was undoubtedly as fine as his carriage. She sat relaxed, listening to the fading sounds of excitement about the fire, the squeaks of snow under the wheels, and the strenuous breathing of the ox. She thanked Amida Buddha that her precious scrolls were safe.

When they arrived, the men unyoked the ox at the main gate and pulled the carriage across a courtyard to the doorway of the eastern wing. They were met by smiling servants. The counselor directed them to sweep away any trace of snow before he allowed the women to step onto the veranda. This amused Aoi. Their skirts were already wet from standing in the snow watching the fire. Perhaps it was his own robes he wished to protect. Following the servants, they moved down the corridor to rooms prepared for them. When the last box was inside the door, Aoi sent word that she was tired and that she would greet her cousin in the afternoon. Leaving the maid to put things away, she changed to dry clothing and lay down to rest.

Roused by a scratching at her door, Aoi woke. It was a maid, sent to lead her to the main hall. Aoi answered that she would soon be ready, then took her time adjusting her robes while her maid combed her hair. She marveled at how refreshed she felt. Small sounds of the household came to her, distant rattles from the kitchen, a phrase of koto music, repeated several times before the piece was resumed, the voice of a child saying, "No, no, no, no!" and the nurse answering "Wait!" It had been many years since Aoi had lived in a house with a family. She herself had no children. When her husband died she was still young and she had entered palace service soon afterward. Now she felt exhilarated at the prospect of a few months of living here peacefully, responsible only for those courtesies that are expected of a guest. It was simply the thought of change that made her so elated, this gift of circumstance, not even requiring consideration or decision, which she could accept freely because she must.

She found her cousin sitting near a large round brazier. They had been friends when they were younger; but they had not met for ten years now. Aoi was interested to see the changes in Akiko, as she was called. She had not lost her fresh color, but she seemed larger, more solid under her heavy winter robes. Smiling, Akiko bowed with a cheerful greeting.

"Ah, it has been such a long time. I won't say that it was good luck that the palace burned, but I am glad that you have come here because of it. My husband says that all your things were saved and that no one was injured."

"Yes, our only loss was a set of robes, ruined by the snow, and they were old ones, put on especially for running away from the fire. We even had time to think of that."

The counselor arrived and settled on a cushion near the brazier.

"Shall I stir the charcoal to warm you?" asked his wife. "It is becoming quite cold as the sun goes down."

"I should hardly call this cold," he said, then turning to Aoi, "Has my curly-haired wife offered you hot wine?"

Aoi looked at Akiko. This joking reference to curly hair hardly seemed justified. True, her hair did not lie as smooth and straight as most women would prefer, but it was quite long and thick and neatly bound with ribbons.

"Now that you are here, I will have it brought," Akiko said.

When the wine had been served, the counselor sent for the children. Two girls of eight and ten came together and greeted Aoi properly and shyly, glancing through their hair as they bowed. Aoi responded gravely, liking the bright curiosity she saw in their faces.

"But where is the baby?" said Akiko.

The maids who were pouring the wine looked at one another and pressed their hands to their mouths to keep from laughing. Before they could explain, loud wails sounded from beyond the door and the sliding panel opened to reveal the nurse, struggling to hold onto a plump boy of two who was pushing himself out of her arms with hands and feet, seeming about to fall on his head. He looked over his shoulder, saw Aoi and leaned violently the other way, forcing the nurse to put him down. Aoi laughed and involuntarily held out her arms. This so startled the baby that his crying stopped in a breath. Finding himself on his feet, he looked back the way they had come and at Aoi again, then pelted across the floor and landed in her lap with such force that she nearly lost her balance.

Both parents protested to the nurse with dismay, but the child's natural acceptance of Aoi made their scolding seem excessive. Giving him a quick squeeze, Aoi set him down.

"You sit here," was all she said. He accepted that, too, and stayed beside her for a few minutes before running to his mother.

In this way, Aoi joined the Middle Counselor's family. From the beginning she found a place in the daily routine. On that first evening, Akiko explained that she always woke early so that she could see the sun come up.

"I am fond of painting and, in the winter, the garden pleases me most in the early morning," she said.

"Painting!" exclaimed the counselor. "Only the Chinese really understand painting. If you want to see some fine brushwork, I will show you my scroll by the great painter Wu."

"I should be honored to see it," said Aoi. "It must be a very rare thing."

"Oh, indeed it is. I keep it in the storeroom and even my curly-haired wife never touches it." He smiled genially at Akiko.

"Let us make that a special occasion, some afternoon when the light is good," she said. "Now it is late and we have only the lamp to see by." She turned to Aoi. "I will be sure that you are not disturbed by my early rising," she said.

"Oh, no! Please have me wakened, too. I should like to join you, if I may."

The first morning it was difficult to get up.

"Discipline, discipline," Aoi said to herself as she clutched the edge of the covers, unable to force her arms to throw them aside. It was still dark when she entered Akiko's quarters. Her cousin sat beside the brazier which glowed so brightly that Aoi was warmed at the sight of it. Beyond her was the deep blue light of early morning, seen through the opened outer doors. Aoi settled across from Akiko and put down her writing box to pull her padded jacket close about her. In the garden, the blue of the snow began to lighten, changed to pink and then to violet, as the sun travelled from behind the mountains, through a band of clear sky and on above a layer of cloud. When daylight had fully arrived, Aoi saw for the first time the beauty of Akiko's garden.

Bounded by smooth walls, it was not large. Central to the design was a group of wide, flat stones set together and on top of one another so that they took the shape of a flying crane that hovered over the far side of a good-sized pond. The snow lay on top of the stones, leaving exposed the darkness of their sides and emphasizing the winged shape. The water of the pond and of the stream that ran under the east wing and into it was black with a shifting pattern of icy blue reflected from the sky. Masses of pine, bamboo,

and camellia softened the expanses of the walls, paths could be identified under the snow, and a small stone lantern wore a lopsided hat of white. Near the veranda, a plum tree stretched out black boughs, every twig under its neatly laid burden of snow. The combined weight and seeming lightness of the stone-bird shape held a fascination for the eye, so that the spirit was completely engaged in contemplation of this garden.

After the first quiet greetings and a few exchanges about the effects of the growing light, neither woman spoke. A servant brought hot soup. Akiko spread paper on a cloth on the floor in front of her and made sketches of the garden. Aoi, on her side of the brazier, practiced calligraphy or wrote poems to go with Akiko's drawings.

Snow lies deep, a lifeless white.
Yet here are berries, still red.

Akiko had a way of picking out small details, which her brush laid down on paper with a certain drama. A bird, coming into being under Akiko's brush, could be seen to be resisting the cold. She could make an elegant design from a cluster of fallen pine needles or two bamboo stalks, leaning together. Her drawing was good, but it was her perception that made the paintings unusual. Just from watching Akiko, Aoi learned a new way of seeing.

Until the disaster that destroyed the peace of the household, the days fell into a pattern, which was centered for Aoi on the hours spent looking at the garden.

After the quiet hour at dawn, she usually helped teach the girls. They were gay and playful, fond of surprising their teacher with poems not yet assigned, liable to mock the careful manners they were learning but never impolite.

The baby was often brought to see Aoi. She loved the rough physical contact with this energetic child. It was a new experience for her and it meant so much to her that she wore old robes so she need not restrain him; and she had her room simplified. All the scrolls in their various wooden boxes and brocade covers were moved to a high shelf, out of reach of Akiko's curious son.

When she felt like it, Aoi could drop from this family routine and spend time alone in her room, reading the scrolls or writing in Chinese. There was pleasure in doing this openly and without

deceit. It was unusual for a woman to have knowledge of Chinese and, at the palace, the ladies were quick to criticize anyone who could be suspected of making a display of it.

Sometimes she visited the princess or friends in other parts of the city. The palace was being rebuilt and there was scandal connected with it. It was said that the workmen, who had been sent from the west, were stealing the new fittings before they could be installed. Some said it was not the carpenters and plasterers but thieves from the southern part of the city. However it happened, doors and doorposts, boards and blinds disappeared from the site, even when put under guard. There were always complaints of burglary throughout the city, but Aoi's friends insisted that they had increased. After these visits, Aoi found herself more and more content to return to Akiko's serene household.

Besides the pattern of the days, another pattern emerged, a troubling one. Aoi noticed that, when they were together, whatever Akiko said, the counselor soon said the opposite. It was such an obvious thing that, after Akiko made a statement, Aoi would wait for the counselor's reverse statement. He never lost his pleasant manner or Akiko her calm, except when he referred to her curly hair. Then her eyelids would lower slightly and her chin dip, as if she were accepting a secret blow. She often smoothed the hair at the top of her head, though she tried to keep him from seeing.

One day he returned early in the afternoon, announcing that the light was good and he wanted to look at the Wu scroll. Summoning Akiko and Aoi to the main hall, he ordered the doors opened all the way, while he went himself to the storeroom. Akiko sent a maid to call the girls and another for extra clothing, for it was very cold. Her personal maid came with a soft cloth to spread on the floor on which to handle the famous painting as it was unrolled. A shout from the back of the house arrested these preparations. The counselor, when he entered, was puffing in his effort to speak.

"It is not there! The scroll is gone!" he said. "But . . ." Exclamation and outcry were stopped in the throat by the counselor's expression of intense bewilderment, as he waved a large wooden key. "It can't be gone. The storeroom was locked and I always carry the key!"

He turned his head, as if looking at them all, but his eyes were glazed, his mind concentrated on trying to grasp how this impossible thing could have happened. Suddenly he whirled, his robes flying out around his feet, and ran back to the storeroom.

Aoi rose with the others and followed him to the back corner of the main building. The storeroom was the only stone part of the whole house, a square construction with a heavy wooden door. Set flush into the door was a thick wooden bolt. The lock was engaged by sliding the bolt home, allowing strong rods of varying lengths to drop into the bolt. To open such a door, a broad wooden key must be set into the carved-out space just under the rods, and by fitting the rods on the key into the holes made for them, the inner rods were raised simultaneously to just the right height to hold them clear of the bolt, which could then slide back. Aoi knew these locks as Chinese devices. She looked with interest at the key, with its round projections of varying heights. The counselor was busy demonstrating how he had opened the door and put his hand to the exact place on the shelf where the scroll should have been.

"Is anything else missing?" asked Aoi.

He turned quickly back into the storeroom. Lanterns were brought and he searched every shelf and opened chests and boxes, not allowing any of the servants beyond the door. Akiko's maid began to cry and was comforted by Aoi's maid. Menservants ran outside, armed with staves which they whacked about under the house and among the bushes. The little group of women and children looked at each other uneasily when the counselor emerged from his search. All his panic was gone.

"That scroll has been the glory of this family for one hundred years," he said. "It is not possible that it is stolen."

Akiko bowed her head and sank down to the floor where she stood. Aoi went to her and felt her trembling. She looked at the counselor.

"You must have the house searched," she said, meeting his eye, acknowledging to him that she was the outsider and had been first with this suggestion.

With great difficulty she raised Akiko, who seemed unable to manage her limbs, and led her to her room. The counselor strode shouting to the outer door, to call back the men.

Thorough search inside the house and far-flung alarms outside it produced no result. The servants were searched and questioned again and again. Two were dismissed, not for any specific reason but because they were known to have relatives in the southwestern section of the city, where so many thieves and bandits gathered. Aoi insisted that all her scrolls be fully opened and examined. The counselor did this himself, embarrassed but determined. She as-

sisted him, knowing it would be impossible to stay on with them if there were any suspicion directed toward her.

For days the maids went about with nervous shufflings, unwilling to enter the corridors, where they might meet their angry master. Akiko stayed in her room. Aoi made herself useful by occupying the girls with games and lessons, and she often entertained the baby.

After the first few days of activity, the counselor seemed to give up. He came home less and less often and was cold and silent with his wife.

In spite of the tension, an underlying peace returned to the house. The maids were again cheerful and noisy, the children let their voices out once more, and Aoi and Akiko resumed their early morning time together. Seeing her cousin as rapt and peaceful as before, Aoi thought back to the trembling heap on the floor that had been Akiko on the day of the theft.

Her husband is gone for days at a time, she thought. When he is at home, his anger sizzles about him like lightning. She is mistress of the house, he blames her that the scroll is gone. Yet she holds the brush as firmly as ever. Returning to her room, she called her maid and they conferred all morning, going once to the shelf of scrolls and finding what they were looking for.

"... Master, the gardener is here. He asks to speak to you."

"When I have finished my meal."

The gardener waited on his knees in the snow.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Master, this was found beside the carriage step." The gardener held out an elaborate court fan. The counselor accepted it, his face gone blank for a moment. It was one of his finest.

"... Master, the kitchen maid asked me to give you this." Akiko's maid held out a small gold incense burner. "It came back to the kitchen on the tray after your morning meal."

"... It's strange, you know. That court baton we looked for everywhere, remember?"

"Of course I remember. I have been carrying an old fashioned one for three days."

"The men cleaned out the carriage yesterday and they found it under the cushions."

"... Your sash, master, we still haven't found it. I'm ..."

"What sash? I know nothing of sashes. Take away this water

and bring me some that is hot."

"... Ah, master, welcome home. You must be tired. Let me bring you something to eat."

"I don't know why I should be tired, I haven't been able to do a thing today except worry about what has happened to my scroll."

"I am sorry to see you so troubled, master. Maybe it will turn up. After all..."

"Are you trying to imply that I could have *mislaid* such a valuable thing? A scroll like that is not something one carries about and puts down in the wrong place."

"No, master."

He spoke with force but his eyes showed uncertainty.

These incidents all took place in the space of ten days and somehow everyone in the household knew about them. At first, the counselor received quietly the things returned to him, but then his temper rose and he either scolded the servant who brought him something recently found or denied that he had ever lost it. Aoi almost pitied his confusion.

It was seldom now that he came home early enough to sit with them in the late afternoon. At court, Aoi had heard stories of another lady in the Sixth Ward. Every man had his other ladies, but Aoi felt that the Middle Counselor was unusually careful of his wife's feelings, even now sending word about unlucky directions and taboos when he stayed away from her. It was only since the upset over the theft of the scroll that he had failed to return for the night.

On a warm day in the Second Month, Aoi and Akiko sat sewing spring robes. The shutters were open, to give them light, and the loose piles of willow green, yellow, and pale rose silk seemed to glow. Outside, water dripped from the eaves and ran under the snow. The plum boughs were full of buds already showing white. Both ladies looked up when they heard the shout of the carriage-man, announcing the return of the master.

Akiko had the silk removed and sent to the kitchen for wine and rice cakes. Aoi excused herself, beckoning to her maid.

"You are coming back?" said Akiko.

"Yes, soon. I will call the children."

She returned to find the family marvelling at the sunshine, which was just beginning to edge into the room. The counselor sat across from his wife, his posture easy and natural, expressing neither anger nor dejection. He has accepted it, Aoi thought. He has

decided that it is gone and he will never know what happened to it. She greeted him and put her cushion beside Akiko.

"Isn't the baby coming?" said the counselor.

"Yes, I saw the nurse looking for him," said Aoi. "Listen, you can hear them."

Far down the corridor, the nurse's voice sounded.

"Where are you? Come to see your father."

Her voice dimmed and swelled as she went from room to room and turned back and advanced in the hall.

"Little Master, you are not to play games with me!" came to them faintly and then there was silence. The door slid a little in its track, a small hand reached around it and pushed it open. The baby stood alone in the doorway, blinking in the strong sunlight. He held in his arms a long narrow bundle wrapped in brocade. Finding his father's figure, he walked to him sedately and dropped the bundle in his lap.

"Box," the baby said.

It was the scroll, the famous scroll of Master Wu, missing now for a month. The Middle Counselor unrolled it only far enough to see the beginning.

"Where did you get this?"

"Who gave this to you?"

"Where did you find it?"

To all these questions, the baby answered simply, "Box." Joyful and exclaiming, the Middle Counselor hurried with his key to the storeroom.

Aoi left soon after that, to join the princess at her father's house. Now that spring was coming, life would soon be busier, and the princess would need all her ladies close at hand. On her last morning in Akiko's house, Aoi went as usual to see the garden at dawn.

In darkness the path is gone,
Under snow it disappears.
Only warmth and light
Show again the turn it takes.

She passed the poem to Akiko and saw understanding and humor fill her cousin's face.

"Yes," Akiko said, "it is time for a few explanations. You have been busy in my behalf, I think. But how did you know I had taken the scroll?"

"When I saw you so little troubled afterward, I thought that you must know something the counselor did not. All the maids, too, seemed to get over their anxiety."

"One cannot keep secrets from one's household women."

"No," said Aoi, laughing. "They always know everything, don't they? In this case, that was an advantage, because I needed their help."

"You guessed that I used the scroll in my study of painting?"

"Yes. You must have had it out that day, when he came asking for it, and had no time to put it back. So you tied it under your robes, held by the sash. It must have slipped down and that was why you had so much trouble getting up, when I helped you to return to your room. I looked for it in the only place it could have been, and found it among my scrolls."

"My maid put it there after the search."

"But Akiko, how did you open the storeroom? Your husband always carries the key."

"He carries a key but not always that key. My father had an old Chinese key and on some days I substitute that key on my husband's cord."

Akiko lowered her face, embarrassed to be admitting that she deceived her husband in this way. "Well," she continued, "he has it back and he seems satisfied that it was through his own carelessness that it was lost. I have heard recently of many things that were missing and then found."

"Please forgive me for not telling you of our plan. We thought it best not to involve you. Your women have proved quite adept at secret management. I needed only to hint at the kind of incidents we needed, and their imaginations bloomed."

"I am very grateful to you. I wish also to thank you for the camellia oil."

Now Aoi was embarrassed. She had not meant for Akiko to know of that.

"Your maid has shown such talent for secrecy, I thought she could surely put a little dressing on your hair without your knowledge."

"Oh, she didn't tell me about it. I am familiar with camellia oil and I recognized the scent. It does make my hair lie down, but I haven't bothered to use it for years."

"Then I must certainly apologize to you. It seemed to me that you were a little bothered by . . ."

"Ah," said Akiko. "You must understand my husband. Perhaps he feels that I am a little backward, always staying here at home with the children, taking no interest in visiting and fashion. His other lady . . ."

Aoi looked up in surprise, and Akiko laughed at her expression. "Of course he has another lady, like any other man. I know where she lives and I am grateful that he has not brought her here. Two wives do not live happily in the same house, even if they have quite separate quarters."

Aoi thought of all the intrigues she knew that had developed from jealousy between principal wives and secondary wives. Akiko seemed to follow her thoughts.

"The lady is young and most perfect, they say. And yet . . ."

She did not finish the thought, which was that he came to this house every day. Aoi gazed with affection at her cousin's full face with its ruddy cheeks and open smile, framed in slightly curly hair. As usual, Akiko's perception was clear. She understood his constant mention of her hair and his refusal to find agreement with any small thing she said. He was trying to deny the importance she had for him, as if it were a failure to care so much for his principal wife.

Aoi made one last comment on the scroll affair.

"I hope you do not think it was too dangerous, giving that precious painting to the baby. It was the only way we could think of to avoid explanations."

Behind them, the baby opened the door with a rattling noise and ran with his usual speed to Aoi, holding in his hand a letter. Opening it, she found a poem.

If only it did not have such a twist.
This troublesome pine.
But Master Wu would never paint
A straight one.

"Who gave you this?" Aoi asked.

"Letter," the baby said. In the hall, the maids could be heard trying to stifle their laughter.

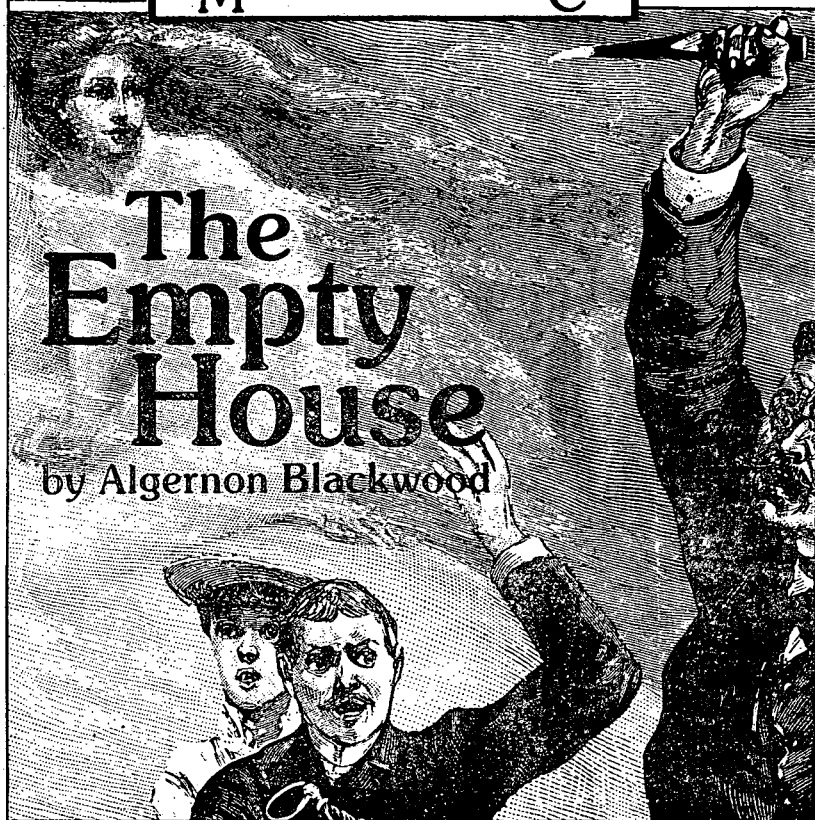


Illustration by Marc Yankus

Certain houses, like certain persons, manage somehow to proclaim at once their character for evil. In the case of the latter, no particular feature need betray them; they may boast an open countenance and an ingenuous smile; and yet a little of their company leaves the unalterable conviction that there is something radically amiss with their being: that they are evil. Willy nilly, they seem to communicate an atmosphere of secret and wicked thoughts which makes those in their immediate neighborhood shrink from the them as from a thing diseased.

And, perhaps, with houses the same principle is operative, and it is the aroma of evil deeds committed under a particular roof, long after the actual doers have passed away, that makes the goose-flesh come and the hair rise. Something of the original passion of

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the evildoer, and of the horror felt by his victim, enters the heart of the innocent watcher, and he becomes suddenly conscious of tingling nerves, creeping skin, and a chilling of the blood. He is terror-stricken without apparent cause.

There was manifestly nothing in the external appearance of this particular house to bear out the tales of the horror that was said to reign within. It was neither lonely nor unkempt. It stood, crowded into a corner of the square, and looked exactly like the houses on either side of it. It had the same number of windows as its neighbors; the same balcony overlooking the gardens; the same white steps leading up to the heavy black front door; and, in the rear, there was the same narrow strip of green, with neat box borders, running up to the wall that divided it, from the backs of the adjoining houses. Apparently, too, the number of chimney pots on the roof was the same; the breadth and angle of the eaves; and even the height of the dirty area railings.

And yet this house in the square, that seemed precisely similar to its fifty ugly neighbors, was a matter of fact entirely different—horribly different.

Wherein lay this marked, invisible difference is impossible to say. It cannot be ascribed wholly to the imagination, because persons who had spent some time in the house, knowing nothing of the facts, had declared positively that certain rooms were so disagreeable they would rather die than enter them again, and that the atmosphere of the whole house produced in them symptoms of a genuine terror; while the series of innocent tenants who had tried to live in it and been forced to decamp at the shortest possible notice, was indeed little less than a scandal in the town.

When Shorthouse arrived to pay a "week-end" visit to his Aunt Julia in her little house on the sea-front at the other end of the town, he found her charged to the brim with mystery and excitement. He had only received her telegram that morning, and he had come anticipating boredom; but the moment he touched her hand and kissed her apple-skin wrinkled cheek, he caught the first wave of her electrical condition. The impression deepened when he learned that there were to be no other visitors, and that he had been telegraphed for with a very special object.

Something was in the wind, and the "something" would doubtless bear fruit; for this elderly spinster aunt, with a mania for psychical research, had brains as well as willpower, and by hook or by crook she usually managed to accomplish her ends. The revelation was made soon after tea, when she sidled close up to him as they paced

slowly along the sea-front in the dusk.

"I've got the keys," she announced in a delighted, yet half awesome voice. "Got them till Monday!"

"The keys of the bathing-machine, or—?" he asked innocently, looking from the sea to the town. Nothing brought her so quickly to the point as feigning stupidity.

"Neither," she whispered. "I've got the keys of the haunted house in the square—and I'm going there tonight."

Shorthouse was conscious of the slightest possible tremor down his back. He dropped his teasing tone. Something in her voice and manner thrilled him. She was in earnest.

"But you can't go alone—" he began.

"That's why I wired for you," she said with decision.

He turned to look at her. The ugly, lined enigmatical face was alive with excitement. There was the flow of genuine enthusiasm round it like a halo. The eyes shone. He caught another wave of her excitement, and a second tremor, more marked than the first, accompanied it.

"Thanks, Aunt Julia," he said politely; "thanks awfully."

"I should not dare to go quite alone," she went on, raising her voice; "but with you I should enjoy it immensely. You're afraid of nothing, I know."

"Thanks so much," he said again. "Er—is anything likely to happen?"

"A great deal *has* happened," she whispered, "though it's been most cleverly hushed up. Three tenants have come and gone in the last few months, and the house is said to be empty for good now."

In spite of himself Shorthouse became interested. His aunt was so very much in earnest.

"The house is very old indeed," she went on, "and the story—an unpleasant one—dates a long way back. It has to do with a murder committed by a jealous stableman who had some affair with a servant in the house. One night he managed to secrete himself in the cellar, and when everyone was asleep, he crept upstairs to the servants' quarters, chased the girl down to the next landing, and before anyone could come to the rescue threw her bodily over the banisters into the hall below."

"And the stableman—?"

"Was caught, I believe, and hanged for murder; but it all happened a century ago, and I've not been able to get more details of the story."

Shorthouse now felt his interest thoroughly aroused; but, though

he was not particularly nervous for himself, he hesitated a little on his aunt's account.

"On one condition," he said at length.

"Nothing will prevent my going," she said firmly; "but I may as well hear your condition."

"That you guarantee your power of self-control if anything really horrible happens. I mean—that you are sure you won't get too frightened."

"Jim," she said scornfully, "I'm not young, I know, nor are my nerves; but *with you* I should be afraid of nothing in the world!"

This, of course, settled it, for Shorthouse had no pretensions to being other than a very ordinary young man, and an appeal to his vanity was irresistible. He agreed to go.

Instinctively, by a sort of subconscious preparation, he kept himself and his forces well in hand the whole evening, compelling an accumulative reserve of control by that nameless inward process of gradually putting all the emotions away and turning the key upon them—a process difficult to describe, but wonderfully effective, as all men who have lived through severe trials of the inner man well understand. Later, it stood him in good stead.

But it was not until half past ten, when they stood in the hall, well in the glare of friendly lamps and still surrounded by comforting human influences, that he had to make the first call upon this store of collected strength. For, once the door was closed, and he saw the deserted silent street stretching away white in the moonlight before them, it came to him clearly that the real test that night would be in dealing with *two fears* instead of one. He would have to carry his aunt's fears as well as his own. And, as he glanced down at her sphinx-like countenance and realized that it might assume no pleasant aspect in a rush of real terror, he felt satisfied with only one thing in the whole adventure—that he had confidence in his own will and power to stand against any shock that might come.

Slowly they walked along the empty streets of the town; a bright autumn moon silvered the roofs, casting deep shadows; there was no breath of wind; and the trees in the formal gardens by the sea-front watched them silently as they passed along. To his aunt's occasional remarks Shorthouse made no reply, realizing that she was simply surrounding herself with mental buffers—saying ordinary things to prevent herself thinking of extraordinary things. Few windows showed lights, and from scarcely a single chimney came smoke or sparks. Shorthouse had already begun to notice

everything, even the smallest details. Presently they stopped at the street corner and looked up at the name on the side of the house full in the moonlight, and with one accord, but without remark, turned into the square and crossed over to the side of it that lay in shadow.

"The number of the house is thirteen," whispered a voice at his side; and neither of them made the obvious reference, but passed across the broad sheet of moonlight and began to march up the pavement in silence.

It was about halfway up the square that Shorthouse felt an arm slipped quietly but significantly into his own, and knew then that their adventure had begun in earnest, and that his companion was already yielding imperceptibly to the influences against them. She needed support.

A few minutes later they stopped before a tall, narrow house that rose before them into the night, ugly in shape and painted a dingy white. Shutterless windows, without blinds, stared down upon them, shining here and there in the moonlight. There were weather streaks in the wall and cracks in the paint, and the balcony bulged out from the first floor a little unnaturally. But beyond this generally forlorn appearance of an occupied house, there was nothing at first sight to single out this particular mansion for the evil character it had most certainly acquired.

Taking a look over their shoulders to make sure they had not been followed, they went boldly up the steps and stood against the huge black door that fronted them forbiddingly. But the first wave of nervousness was now upon them, and Shorthouse fumbled a long time with the key before he could fit it into the lock at all. For a moment, if truth were told, they both hoped it would not open, for they were a prey to various unpleasant emotions as they stood there on the threshold of their ghostly adventure. Shorthouse, shuffling with the key and hampered by the steady weight on his arm, certainly felt the solemnity of the moment. It was as if the whole world—for all experience seemed at that instant concentrated in his own consciousness—were listening to the grating noise of that key. A stray puff of wind wandering down the empty street woke a momentary rustling in the trees behind them, but otherwise this rattling of the key was the only sound audible; and at last it turned in the lock and the heavy door swung open and revealed a yawning gulf of darkness beyond.

With a last glance at the moonlit square, they passed quickly in and the door slammed behind them with a roar that echoed pro-

digiously through empty halls and passages. But, instantly, with the echoes, another sound made itself heard, and Aunt Julia leaned suddenly so heavily upon him that he had to take a step backwards to save himself from falling.

A man had coughed close beside him—so close that it seemed they must have been actually by his side in the darkness.

With the possibility of practical jokes in his mind, Shorthouse at once swung his heavy stick in the direction of the sound; but it met nothing more solid than air. He heard his aunt give a little gasp beside him.

"There's someone here," she whispered; "I heard him."

"Be quiet!" he said sternly. "It was nothing but the noise of the front door."

"Oh! get a light—quick!" she added, as her nephew, fumbling with a box of matches, opened it upside down and let them all fall with a rattle on to the stone floor.

The sound, however, was not repeated; and there was no evidence of retreating footsteps. In another minute they had a candle burning, using an empty end of a cigar case as a holder; and when the first flare had died down he held the impromptu lamp aloft and surveyed the scene. And it was dreary enough in all conscience, for there is nothing more desolate in all the abodes of men than an unfurnished house dimly lit, silent, and forsaken, and yet tenanted by rumor with the memories of evil and violent histories.

They were standing in a wide hallway; on their left was the open door of a spacious dining room, and in front the hall ran, ever narrowing, into a long, dark passage that led apparently to the top of the kitchen stairs. The broad uncarpeted staircase rose in a sweep before them, everywhere draped in shadows, except for a single spot about halfway up where the moonlight came in through the window and fell in a bright patch on the boards. This shaft of light shed a faint radiance above and below it, lending to the objects within its reach a misty outline that was infinitely more suggestive and ghostly than complete darkness. Filtered moonlight always seems to paint faces on the surrounding gloom, and as Shorthouse peered up into the well of darkness and thought of the countless empty rooms and passages in the upper part of the old house, he caught himself longing again for the safety of the moonlit square, or the cosy, bright drawing room they had left an hour before. Then realising that these thoughts were dangerous, he thrust them away again and summoned all his energy for concentration on the present.

"Aunt Julia," he said aloud, severely, "we must now go through the house from top to bottom and make a thorough search."

The echoes of his voice died away slowly all over the building, and in the intense silence that followed he turned to look at her. In the candlelight he saw that her face was already ghastly pale; but she dropped his arm for a moment and said in a whisper, stepping close in front of him—

"I agree. We must be sure there's no one hiding. That's the first thing."

She spoke with evident effort, and he looked at her with admiration.

"You feel quite sure of yourself? It's not too late—"

"I think so," she whispered, her eyes shifting nervously towards the shadows behind. "Quite sure, only one thing—"

"What's that?"

"You must never leave me alone for an instant."

"As long as you understand that any sound or appearance must be investigated at once, for to hesitate means to admit fear. That is fatal."

"Agreed," she said, a little shakily, after a moment's hesitation. "I'll try—"

Arm in arm, Shorthouse holding the dripping candle and the stick, while his aunt carried the cloak over her shoulders, figures of utter comedy to all but themselves, they began a systematic search.

Stealthily, walking on tiptoe and shading the candle lest it should betray their presence through the shutterless windows, they went first into the big dining room. There was not a stick of furniture to be seen. Bare walls, ugly mantelpieces and empty grates stared at them. Everything, they felt, resented their intrusion, watching them, as it were, with veiled eyes; whispers followed them; shadows flitted noiselessly to right and left; something seemed ever at their back, watching, waiting an opportunity to do them injury. There was the inevitable sense that operations which went on when the room was empty had been temporarily suspended till they were well out of the way again. The whole dark interior of the old building seemed to become a malignant Presence that rose up, warning them to desist and mind their own business; every moment the strain on the nerves increased.

Out of the gloomy dining room they passed through large folding doors into a sort of library or smoking room, wrapt equally in silence, darkness, and dust; and from this they regained the hall

near the top of the back stairs.

Here a pitch black tunnel opened before them into the lower regions, and—it must be confessed—they hesitated. But only for a minute. With the worst of the night still to come it was essential to turn from nothing. Aunt Julia stumbled at the top step of the dark descent, ill lit by the flickering candle, and even Shorthouse felt at least half the decision go out of his legs.

"Come on!" he said peremptorily, and his voice ran on and lost itself in the dark, empty spaces below.

"I'm coming," she faltered, catching his arm with unnecessary violence.

They went a little unsteadily down the stone steps, a cold damp air meeting them in the face, close and malodorous. The kitchen, into which the stairs led along a narrow passage, was large, with a lofty ceiling. Several doors opened out of it—some into cupboards with empty jars still standing on the shelves, and others into horrible little ghostly back offices, each colder and less inviting than the last. Black beetles scurried over the floor, and once, when they knocked against a deal table standing in a corner, something about the size of a cat jumped down with a rush and fled, scampering across the stone floor into the darkness. Everywhere there was a sense of recent occupation, an impression of sadness and gloom.

Leaving the main kitchen, they next went towards the scullery. The door was standing ajar, and as they pushed it open to its full extent Aunt Julia uttered a piercing scream, which she instantly tried to stifle by placing her hand over her mouth. For a second Shorthouse stood stock-still, catching his breath. He felt as if his spine had suddenly become hollow and someone had filled it with particles of ice.

Facing them, directly in their way between the doorposts, stood the figure of a woman. She had dishevelled hair and wildly staring eyes, and her face was terrified and white as death.

She stood there motionless for the space of a single second. Then the candle flickered and she was gone—gone utterly—and the door framed nothing but empty darkness.

"Only the beastly jumping candlelight," he said quickly, in a voice that sounded like someone else's and was only half under control. "Come on, Aunt. There's nothing there."

He dragged her forward. With a clattering of feet and a great appearance of boldness they went on; but over his body the skin moved as if crawling ants covered it, and he knew by the weight on his arm that he was supplying the force of locomotion for two.

The scullery was cold, bare, and empty; more like a large prison cell than anything else. They went round it, tried the door into the yard, and the windows, but found them all fastened securely. His aunt moved beside him like a person in a dream. Her eyes were tightly shut, and she seemed merely to follow the pressure of his arm. Her courage filled him with amazement. At the same time he noticed that a certain odd change had come over her face, which somehow evaded his power of analysis.

"There's nothing here, Aunt,," he repeated aloud quickly. "Let's go upstairs and see the rest of the house. Then we'll choose a room to wait up in."

She followed him obediently, keeping close to his side, and they locked the kitchen door behind them. It was a relief to get up again. In the hall there was more light than before, for the moon had travelled a little further down the stairs. Cautiously they began to go up into the dark vault of the upper house, the boards creaking under their weight.

On the first floor they found the large double drawing rooms, a search of which revealed nothing. Here also was no sign of furniture or recent occupancy; nothing but dust and neglect and shadows. They opened the big folding doors between front and back drawing rooms and then came out again to the landing and went on upstairs.

They had not gone up more than a dozen steps when they both simultaneously stopped to listen, looking into each other's eyes with a new apprehension across the flickering candle flame. From the room they had left hardly ten seconds before came the sound of doors quietly closing. It was beyond all question; they heard the booming noise that accompanies the shutting of heavy doors, followed by the sharp catching of the latch.

"We must go back and see," said Shorthouse briefly, in a low tone, and turning to go downstairs again.

Somehow she managed to drag after him, her feet catching in her dress, her face livid.

When they entered the front drawing room it was plain that the folding doors had been closed—half a minute before. Without hesitation Shorthouse opened them. He almost expected to see someone facing him in the back room; but only darkness and cold air met him. They went through both rooms, finding nothing unusual. They tried in every way to make the doors close of themselves, but there was not wind enough even to set the candle flame flickering. The doors would not move without strong pressure. All was silent as the grave. Undeniably the rooms were utterly empty, and the

house utterly still.

"It's beginning," whispered a voice at his elbow which he hardly recognized as his aunt's.

He nodded acquiescence, taking out his watch to note the time. It was fifteen minutes before midnight; he made the entry of exactly what had occurred in his notebook, setting the candle in its case upon the floor in order to do so. It took a moment or two to balance it safely against the wall.

Aunt Julia always declared that at this moment she was not actually watching him, but had turned her head towards the inner room, where she fancied she heard something moving; but, at any rate, both positively agreed that there came a sound of rushing feet, heavy and very swift—and the next instant the candle was out!

But to Shorthouse himself had come more than this, and he has always thanked his fortunate stars that it came to him alone and not to his aunt, too. For, as he rose from the stooping position of balancing the candle, and before it was actually extinguished, a face thrust itself forward so close to his own that he could almost have touched it with his lips. It was a face working with passion; a man's face, dark, with thick features, and angry, savage eyes. It belonged to a common man, and it was evil in its ordinary normal expression, no doubt, but as he saw it, alive with intense, aggressive emotion, it was a malignant and terrible human countenance.

There was no movement of the air; nothing but the sound of rushing feet—stockinged or muffled feet; the apparition of the face; and the almost simultaneous extinguishing of the candle.

In spite of himself, Shorthouse uttered a little cry, nearly losing his balance as his aunt clung to him with her whole weight in one moment of real, uncontrollable terror. She made no sound, but simply seized him bodily. Fortunately, however, she had seen nothing, but had only heard the rushing feet, for her control returned almost at once, and he was able to disentangle himself and strike a match.

The shadows ran away on all sides before the glare, and his aunt stooped down and groped for the cigar case with the precious candle. Then they discovered that the candle had not been *blown* out at all; it had been *crushed* out. The wick was pressed down into the wax, which was flattened as if by some smooth, heavy instrument.

How his companion so quickly overcame her terror, Shorthouse never properly understood; but his admiration for her self-control increased tenfold, and at the same time served to feed his own

dying flame—for which he was undeniably grateful. Equally inexplicable to him was the evidence of physical force they had just witnessed. He at once suppressed the memory of stories he had heard of “physical mediums” and their dangerous phenomena; for if these were true, and either his aunt or himself was unwittingly a physical medium, it meant that they were simply aiding to focus the forces of a haunted house already charged to the brim. It was like walking with unprotected lamps among uncovered stores of gunpowder.

So, with as little reflection as possible, he simply relit the candle and went up to the next floor. The arm in his trembled, it is true, and his own tread was often uncertain, but they went on with thoroughness, and after a search revealing nothing they climbed the last flight of stairs to the top floor of all.

Here they found a perfect nest of small servants’ rooms, with broken pieces of furniture, dirty cane-bottomed chairs, chests of drawers, cracked mirrors, and decrepit bedsteads. The rooms had low sloping ceilings already hung here and there with cobwebs, small windows, and badly plastered walls—a depressing and dismal region which they were glad to leave behind.

It was on the stroke of midnight when they entered a small room on the third floor, close to the top of the stairs, and arranged to make themselves comfortable for the remainder of their adventure. It was absolutely bare, and was said to be the room—then used as a clothes closet—into which the infuriated groom had chased his victim and finally caught her. Outside, across the narrow landing, began the stairs leading up to the floor above, and the servants’ quarters where they had just searched.

In spite of the chilliness of the night there was something in the air of this room that cried for an open window. But there was more than this. Shorthouse could only describe it by saying that he felt less master of himself here than in any other part of the house. There was something that acted directly on the nerves, tiring the resolution, enfeebling the will. He was conscious of this result before he had been in the room five minutes, and it was in the short time they stayed there that he suffered the wholesale depletion of his vital forces, which was, for himself, the chief horror of the whole experience.

They put the candle on the floor of the cupboard, leaving the door a few inches ajar, so that there was no glare to confuse the eyes, and no shadow to shift about on walls and ceiling. Then they spread the cloak on the floor and sat down to wait, with their backs

against the wall.

Shorthouse was within two feet of the door on to the landing; his position commanded a good view of the main staircase leading down into the darkness, and also of the beginning of the servants' stairs going to the floor above; the heavy stick lay beside him within easy reach.

The moon was now high above the house. Through the open window they could see the comforting stars like friendly eyes watching in the sky. One by one the clocks of the town struck midnight, and when the sounds died away the deep silence of a windless night fell again over everything. Only the boom of the sea, far away and lugubrious, filled the air with hollow murmurs.

Inside the house the silence became awful; awful, he thought, because any minute now it might be broken by sounds portending terror. The strain of waiting told more and more severely on the nerves; they talked in whispers when they talked at all, for their voices sounded queer and unnatural. A chilliness, not altogether due to the night air, invaded the room, and made them cold. The influences against them, whatever these might be, were slowly robbing them of self-confidence, and the power of decisive action; their forces were on the wane, and the possibility of real fear took on a new and terrible meaning. He began to tremble for the elderly woman by his side, whose pluck could hardly save her beyond a certain extent.

He heard the blood singing in his veins. It sometimes seemed so loud that he fancied it prevented his hearing properly certain other sounds that were beginning very faintly to make themselves audible in the depths of the house. Every time he fastened his attention on these sounds, they instantly ceased. They certainly came no nearer. Yet he could not rid himself of the idea that movement was going on somewhere in the lower regions of the house. The drawing room floor, where the doors had been so strangely closed, seemed too near; the sounds were further off than that. He thought of the great kitchen, with the scurrying black beetles, and of the dismal little scullery; but, somehow or other, they did not seem to come from there either. Surely they were not *outside* the house!

Then, suddenly, the truth flashed into his mind, and for the space of a minute he felt as if his blood had stopped flowing and turned to ice.

The sounds were not downstairs at all; they were *upstairs*—upstairs, somewhere among those horrid gloomy little servants' rooms with their bits of broken furniture, low ceilings,

and cramped windows—upstairs where the victim had first been disturbed and stalked to her death.

And the moment he discovered where the sounds were, he began to hear them more clearly. It was the sound of feet, moving stealthily along the passage overhead, in and out among the rooms, and past the furniture.

He turned quickly to steal a glance at the motionless figure seated beside him, to note whether she had shared his discovery. The faint candlelight coming through the crack in the cupboard door threw her strongly-marked face into vivid relief against the white of the wall. But it was something else that made him catch his breath and stare again. An extraordinary something had come into her face and seemed to spread over her features like a mask; it smoothed out the deep lines and drew the skin everywhere a little tighter so that the wrinkles disappeared; it brought into the face—with the sole exception of the old eyes—an appearance of youth and almost of childhood.

He stared in speechless amazement—amazement that was dangerously near to horror. It was his aunt's face indeed, but it was her face of forty years ago, the vacant innocent face of a girl. He had heard stories of that strange effect of terror which could wipe a human countenance clean of other emotions, obliterating all previous expressions; but he had never realized that it could be literally true, or could mean anything so simply horrible as what he now saw. For the dreadful signature of overmastering fear was written plainly in that utter vacancy of the girlish face beside him; and when, feeling his intense gaze, she turned to look at him, he instinctively closed his eyes tightly to shut out the sight.

Yet, when he turned a minute later, his feelings well in hand, he saw to his intense relief another expression; his aunt was smiling, and though the face was deathly white, the awful veil had lifted and the normal look was returning.

"Anything wrong?" was all he could think of to say at the moment. And the answer was eloquent, coming from such a woman.

"I feel cold—and a little frightened," she whispered.

He offered to close the window, but she seized hold of him and begged him not to leave her side even for an instant.

"It's upstairs, I know," she whispered, with an odd half-laugh; "but I can't possibly go up."

But Shorthouse thought otherwise, knowing that in action lay their best hope of self-control.

He took the brandy flask and poured out a glass of neat spirit,

still enough to help anybody over anything. She swallowed it with a little shiver. His only idea now was to get out of the house before her collapse became inevitable; but this could not safely be done by turning tail and running from the enemy. Inaction was no longer possible; every minute he was growing less master of himself, and desperate, aggressive measures were imperative without further delay. Moreover, the action must be taken *towards* the enemy, not away from it; the climax, if necessary and unavoidable, would have to be faced boldly. He could do it now; but in ten minutes he might not have the force left to act for himself, much less for both!

Upstairs, the sounds were meanwhile becoming louder and closer, accompanied by occasional creaking of the boards. Someone was moving stealthily about, stumbling now and then awkwardly against the furniture.

Waiting a few moments to allow the tremendous dose of spirits to produce its effect, and knowing this would last but a short time under the circumstances, Shorthouse then quietly got on his feet, saying in a determined voice:

"Now Aunt Julia, we'll go upstairs and find out what all this noise is about. You must come too. It's what we agreed."

He picked up his stick and went to the cupboard for the candle. A limp form rose shakily beside him breathing hard, and he heard a voice say very faintly something about being "ready to come." The woman's courage amazed him; it was so much greater than his own; and, as they advanced, holding aloft the dripping candle, some subtle force exhaled from this trembling, white-faced old woman at his side that was the true source of his inspiration. It held something really great that shamed him and gave him the support without which he would have proved far less equal to the occasion.

They crossed the dark landing, avoiding with their eyes the deep black space over the banisters. Then they began to mount the narrow staircase to meet the sounds which, minute by minute, grew louder and nearer. About halfway up the stairs Aunt Julia stumbled and Shorthouse turned to catch her by the arm, and just at that moment there came a terrific crash in the servants' corridor overhead. It was instantly followed by a shrill, agonized scream that was a cry of terror and a cry for help melted into one.

Before they could move aside, or go down a single step, someone came rushing along the passage overhead, blundering horribly, racing madly, at full speed, three steps at a time, down the very staircase where they stood. The steps were light and uncertain;

but close behind them sounded the heavier tread of another person, and the staircase seemed to shake.

Shorthouse and his companion just had time to flatten themselves against the wall when the jumble of flying steps was upon them, and two persons, with the slightest possible interval between them, dashed past at full speed. It was a perfect whirlwind of sound breaking in upon the midnight silence of the empty building.

The two runners, pursuer and pursued, had passed clean through them where they stood, and already with a thud the boards below had received first one, then the other. Yet they had seen absolutely nothing—not a hand, or arm, or face, or even a shred of flying clothing.

There came a second's pause. Then the first one, the lighter of the two, obviously the pursued one, ran with uncertain footsteps into the little room which Shorthouse and his aunt had just left. The heavier one followed. There was sound of scuffling, gasping, and smothered screaming; and then out on to the landing came the step—of a single person *treading weightily*.

A dead silence followed for the space of half a minute, and then was heard a rushing sound through the air. It was followed by a dull, crashing thud in the depths of the house below—on the stone floor of the hall.

Utter silence reigned after. Nothing moved. The flame of the candle was steady. It had been steady the whole time, and the air had been undisturbed by any movement whatsoever. Palsied with terror, Aunt Julia, without waiting for her companion, began fumbling her way downstairs; she was crying gently to herself, and when Shorthouse put his arm round her, and half carried her, he felt that she was trembling like a leaf. He went into the little room and picked up the cloak from the floor, and, arm in arm, walking very slowly, without speaking a word or looking once behind them, they marched down the three flights into the hall.

In the hall they saw nothing, but the whole way down the stairs they were conscious that someone followed them; step by step; when they went faster it was left behind, and when they went more slowly it caught them up. But never once did they look behind to see; and at each turning of the staircase they lowered their eyes for fear of the following horror they might see upon the stairs above.

With trembling hands Shorthouse opened the front door, and they walked out into the moonlight and drew a deep breath of the cool night air blowing in from the sea.



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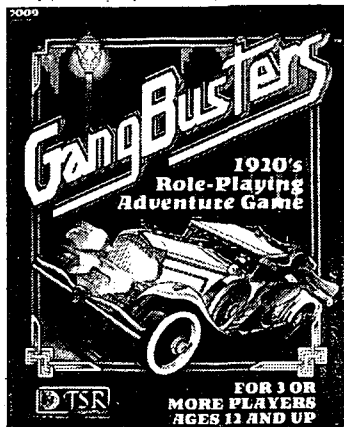
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Every afternoon at three twenty they took their silent outing from Langdon Hall. Always the same route, they walked the streets of Surrey, then returned to the identical hot tea with scones served back at the school at precisely four o'clock.

The townfolk knew the time of day the uniformed boys passed. At the sound of their promenade Chester Downs would straighten his back, survey his gardening handiwork, and walk inside to take his own tea. Sarah Perkins would see them walk past her sitting room window, put aside her knitting, and put the mutton on to stew.

The town might have enjoyed the repetitive outing, but the boys from Langdon Hall did not. On Thursday Headmaster Harper did not accompany the boys. Master Thompson wished he dared lead them to explore new roads, to see new gardens and perhaps different faces, but he found the idea too shocking. Instead he defied Langdon rules by tracing the route in reverse.

Mr. Downs nearly missed his tea. Miss Perkins could only gasp in disbelief. Scores of townfolk rang up the school to report the mishap. Master Thompson was called before Headmaster Harper and sorely chastised for the irregularity.

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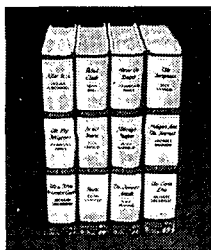
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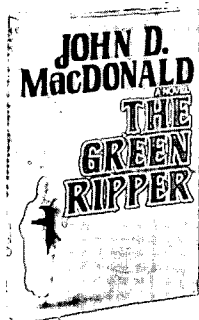
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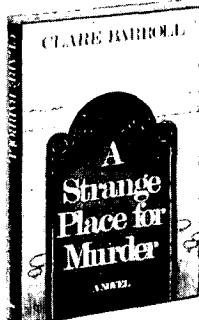
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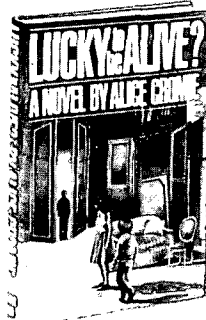
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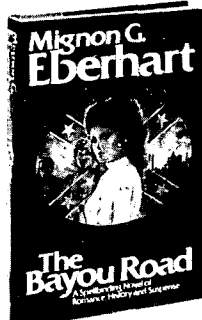
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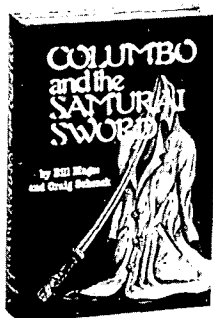
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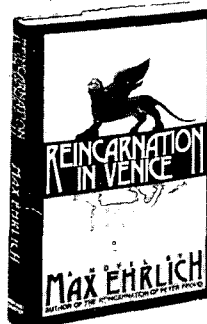
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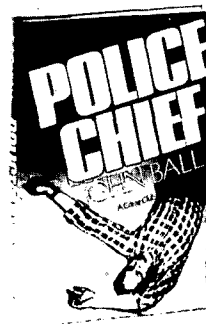
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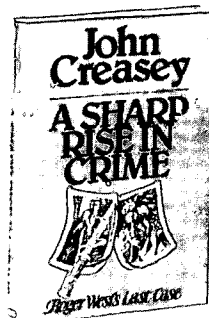
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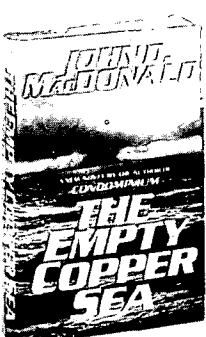
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